

Iraq 360°

Faris Harram and Abdulmohsin Saleh

Views on a Journey from Baghdad to Damascus,
Ankara, Istanbul, Cairo and Beirut



Edited by Media in Cooperation and Transition (MICT)

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All pictures in this book are stills taken from this documentary film (except for chapter 5).

The interviews with Georges Bahgory, William Wells, Borhane Alaouié, Amal Kenawy, Ahmet Ögüt, Rosa Yaseen, Iman Humaydan Younes, Abbas Baydoun, Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh in this book are based on transcriptions from the raw material of “Connecting Baghdad”. The statements by Georges Bahgory, William Wells, Borhane Alaouié in this book were compiled from interviews held by the Iraqi director Oday Rasheed.

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INTRODUCTION

Leaving from Baghdad International Airport on the 1st of September, 2005, the two Iraqi writers, Faris Harram and Abdulmohsin Saleh set out upon a journey which, over the three months to follow, would take them to Damascus; Istanbul and Ankara; Cairo, and Beirut. At each stage of their journey, they met up with artists and intellectuals, attended concerts and exhibitions, and met with writers and publishers, in order to report on these events and their experiences in a radio show called “Iraq 360°.” On a weekly basis for three months, one Lebanese and three Iraqi radio stations aired the show, in which – along with Harram and Saleh – local correspondents from all of these cities reported on the state of contemporary art within their own countries.

Two-and-a-half years after the American led invasion and the demise of the regime, two young Iraqi writers thus embarked upon a cultural expedition which was then followed and shared by the Iraqi public via radio, and which, in its trail, spun a tight weave of cross-border relationships. Planned as a circular roundtrip, the journey was actually deformed into more of a zigzag, due to the Iranian and Saudi Arabian authorities’ distaste at the idea that networking of this kind should take place within their territories. The project aimed at increasing the communication and exchange of ideas between Iraqi intellectuals living in Iraq and their Arabic, Iranian and Turkish colleagues in neighboring countries. In the past, this kind of exchange had been successively discouraged, sabotaged, and hindered by the authoritarian politics of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the belligerent conflicts in the region; in the future, it will take place, more than ever before, outside the borders of Iraq, due to the disastrous conditions within the country and the massive emigration of Iraqi intellectuals over the last three years – the fourth major wave of emigration since the 1950s. One wonders how Iraqi culture will ever recover from yet another depletion of its intellectual wealth.

For the present documentation of their journey, Faris and Abdulmohsin have selected interviews and reflected on experiences which had special meaning for them. In personal accounts, they not only report on events that moved them at various times, but also reflect upon their lives in Iraq from a distance. The impact of political ideology on various forms of art is a topic here, as are Arab nationalism and the legacies left by authoritarian rule in society.

In addition, through extracts taken from their interviews with writers, film directors, video artists, curators, and poets, Harram and Saleh introduce many of the concepts and issues grappled with by artists

on the ground, both regarding their work, and their relationships to the government, the public, and the West. Among other topics, those interviewed touch upon the dramatic decline of interest within their own societies concerning art and literature (Fajr Yacoub, Louay Hussein), and the dire need to widen the reach of art from simply serving an elitist audience to finding reception among the general public (William Wells, Amal Kenawy); they touch upon artistic strategies on how to address the presence of war in post-war societies (Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué, Iman Humaydan Younes, Abbas Baydoun) and criticize “orientalist” tendencies in the reception given to work by artists coming from the Middle East (Ahmet Ögüt). Other questions tackled include, “What difference does it make where the money comes from?” (Vecdi Sayar, Ahmed Telli) and, “To what extent can art be turned into a tool or weapon?” (Borhane Alaouié).

Iraq 360° is a collection of travel narratives and interviews conducted in five cities throughout the Arab region, and in Turkey, which are linked together through their consistent references to themes concerning Iraq, and which achieve the building of bridges between politics and art, between personal biography and history, and between production and critique.

In face of the civil war in Iraq, and in view of the political tensions in the region, MICT expresses most adamantly its gratitude toward the radio stations in Iraq and Lebanon which aired the program, and to Faris Harram and Abdulmohsin Saleh and their many partners in each country who, with expertise, endurance, courage, and engagement, have contributed to the realization of this project.

Anja Wollenberg, MICT

Chapter I

Damascus

Cheap Entertainment and Home-Bound Literature

*Faris, September
2005*

1 The night's darkness was not the only thing that prevented me from making out the landmarks along the road from Amman to Damascus; I was mulling over the preconceived notions held by many Arab intellectuals about Iraqis who had been opposed to Saddam Hussein, who were happy to see him removed from power, and who had just left their US-occupied country.

In the aftermath of the 2003 war, I had noticed that a relatively strong opposition to the occupation had been solidified among also those Iraqis who had been opposed to Saddam Hussein. One of the foundations upon which the formation of that new opposition was built can be traced back to a famous Arab proverb about enemies and friends:

1- The enemy of my friend is my enemy, 2- The friend of my enemy is my enemy, 3- The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

While it may be conceivable that this maxim played a role in forming traditional Arab culture, it is much more difficult to accept the notion that contemporary Arabs have adhered to this dialectic within the cultural and literary fields. As a matter of fact, the maxim has been followed to such a degree that classification of cultural work as being either “friendly” or “hostile,” in correlation to the political opinions of its creators, has become the norm. It is then no great surprise that, following the violent shock of 2003, traditionalist intellectuals (the majority in this case) rushed to identify the “friend” with Saddam



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Hussein, who, in their logic, had been a friend to Arab interests. This “friend” then, had been confronted by an “enemy,” the United States. Furthermore, according to this abstract logic, Iraqi intellectuals who had suffered under Hussein, and therefore stood to benefit from his disposal, became none other than the “friend’s enemy.” In following, those intellectuals also became enemies to the traditionalists, regardless of any stance taken concerning the invasion. For the traditionalists, because they had equated resistance with armed struggle, any concept of peaceful opposition to “the friend’s enemy” did not exist, and only served to make its champions, in their eyes, into untrustworthy elements. Ideas, work, and opinions, then, all became targets of hatred, and the dialogue ceased.

I looked out of the car window at the scattered lights, which indicated that we were passing by villages, and before asking the driver when we would arrive in Damascus, I began thinking about how to open up the dialogue with Syrian artists, writers and intellectuals, without allowing them to jump to the usual hasty conclusions.

Two days later, when Abdulmohsin and I began our first meetings, I realized that my concerns had been exaggerated, and that most of those whom I interviewed in Syria understood perfectly that the opponent of dictatorship and the peaceful resistor could be one and the same person, an intellectual who is a “friend” of “Arab culture.”

- 2 As my feet stepped onto the pavement of Damascus for the first time, I realized how it could be possible to fall in love with stones and windows. I allowed myself to credit this as one of the motivations behind the great Najaf-born Iraqi poet Al-Jawahiri spending almost one-quarter of his life there, up until his death at the age of ninety-seven. The warmth and intimacy of the buildings and the general layout of the alleys and houses reminded me of Najaf, where I had spent my childhood and early youth...This is what I think must have aroused Al-Jawahiri’s love for the city of Damascus. The traces of the Ottoman Empire running through Damascus also reminded me of how those same traces once permeated Baghdad, but were now lost to it. Baghdad has lost a deep part of its own personal history, and it is now rare to see houses with arabesques, stores in the tiny gaps between the houses, intertwining roofs, or narrow winding alleyways.

Al-Abed Street led me to my meeting with Samar Haddad, the owner of The Atlas publishing house, one of the most established bookshops in Damascus. That highly ambitious woman revealed to me how vast quantities of literary and cultural work decompose yearly on Syrian bookshelves. This was nothing new to my companion and me, however. After all, Syrian shelves, with their loss of consumers and readers, are

not integrally different than any other Arab bookshelves. I do not want to lessen the importance of the role played by government censorship in removing potentially dangerous books from publication lists and public debate, but Samar and I simply found no pleasure in pondering that one simple and tragic concept: we live in an unknowledgeable society. This has become an axiom in Arab cultural circles; millions of words have been written by hundreds of writers on this subject – so much so, that even addressing the issue is wearisome and boring. The conclusion is always the same: our governments monopolize the production of information in the fields of science, literature, and art, for example, as well as the propagation of knowledge (through education and the use of media). The content of these curricula has become meaningless, with reading and appreciation of literature at the very bottom of the scale. Knowledge cannot be attained except through individual effort, without any encouragement or support from anything offered by the educational system or the media.

Three days after meeting Samar Haddad, I found myself repeating the same conversation about writing and publishing with the novelist Rosa Yaseen, who, in 2004, had published her novel *Abanous*, which was met by much controversy – despite her having had to purge the novel of many paragraphs before its publication – and sparked a fierce debate within Syria about the limits of artistic freedom that should be granted to women living in a “patriarchal society,” as she put it. Once again, I did not find any enthusiasm in Rosa Yaseen for a conversation about the same tiring issue: the level of writing and the quality of publication in our societies, along with the level of oppression and degree of curtailment of freedoms. Instead, I found Rosa full of sarcasm and wit, arising from her deep confidence in the role that contemporary writers (she was referring to the 1990s generation of Syrian novelists) played in exposing the political, cultural and social oppression widespread in our societies.

“WOMEN SOMETIMES BECOME THEIR OWN WORST ENEMIES”

An interview with the Syrian writer Rosa Yaseen

Abdulmohsin: *I have heard you talking about the new generation of writers which appeared in Syria in the 1990s. Can you briefly give us some background on their emergence?*

Rosa: It would be more appropriate to begin our discussion with the 1960s, when a generation of Syrian writers inspired by political ideology appeared. Up until that time, there had been no real movement, but merely a collection of individual projects such as those undertaken

by Hanna Mina and Abd al-Salam al-Ujaili. In my opinion, it was the writers from the 1960s who founded the Syrian novel. Among these were Hani al-Rahib, Haydar Haydar, Ghada al-Samman, and Nabil Suleiman. They appeared together as a generation and created an important literary scene which had an immense amount of influence on the country's entire literary output. Those writers established a power-base which no one dared to challenge. In the 1970s and '80s, however, there was no broad literary movement. Over the course of those decades, writers were seen as individual exceptions, but their contributions were nevertheless important. To mention a few examples, there was Fawaz Haddad, Faysal Khartush, and Khayri Zahabi, among others. The 1990s, however, witnessed political changes across the board, both in the Middle East and throughout the world. In Syria, the mechanisms of repression were altered, and a deep desire arose on the part of young writers to reform the Syrian novel. All this certainly contributed to the emergence of a new generation of novels, having all the characteristics of a "generational movement."

Abdalmohsin: *In Iraq, we witnessed a similar generational movement in the 1960s, but ours was concerned with poetry.*

Rosa: We had a brilliant poetry generation in the 1960s as well, with poets like Adonis, Muhammad Maghut, Yussef al-Khal and all those from the Majallat al-Shi'r [Poetry Journal: both the name of a journal and of a poetry movement].

Faris: *But these poets were part of the Lebanese and not the Syrian cultural experience.*

Rosa: But they were Syrians!

Abdalmohsin: *That is true. They were Syrian, but I believe, seen from a literary and historical perspective, we can view the '60s generation in Syria as having focused more on the novel, especially because the essence of Majallat al-Shi'r was decidedly Lebanese, as was the environment in which it was born. Both Yussef al-Khal and Adonis were thinking within Lebanese parameters, and both were part of a Lebanese movement. On the other hand, I agree with you completely that the movement in the 1960s concerning the Syrian novel had all the characteristics of a generational movement with all that this entails, including the internal kind of problems that often arise at later stages. In Iraq, we had a similar experience with the '60s generation of poets having an unusual amount of influence. They dominated literary institutions and moved away from being part of a "poetry generation" to becoming part of the very institutions which they had gained control of, eventually reproducing the kind of rigidity and bureaucratic obstruction of*

creativity typical of such institutions. Nevertheless, I agree with you that the '60s generation in Syria had a huge amount of influence and enjoyed a great deal of power.

Rosa: Of course it did. It was not for nothing that the '60s generation was able to occupy the throne, and it undoubtedly opened up unprecedented horizons for the novel.

Abdalmohsin: *So then, what are the characteristics of your own literary generation, the '90s generation, and what is its artistic vision comprised of?*

Rosa: Artists working in the time period between the 1990s and the present time should be considered part of a single generation. Political ideology has somewhat lost its importance in literature and writing, though it has still remained prevalent in the general political sphere. We now seem to have developed a block of feminine voices, however. In the past, the only female writer to write strong and relevant literature was Ghada al-Samman and Colette Khoury, with her first novel, *Days with Him*. Now, the voices of many more young women writers can be heard, and women are becoming aware of their special position, and are actively engaging in society. Their writing is no longer simply an outlet for their frustrations and senses of repression. Examples of some of these women are Manhal Al-Sarrag, Samar Yazbek, and before her, Anisa 'Aboud. There are also two writers who have unfortunately passed away, which was a huge loss for the literary scene. I am referring to Umayya 'Abd Al-Dean and Raga' Taye'.

Faris: *What are the features of the feminine voice? What is its relationship to what is usually referred to as feminist literature?*

Rosa: I think there is a basic ignorance about what constitutes feminist literature. This term was coined in the West at the beginning of the 20th century, and it described literary pieces that addressed the margins of society. It was a counter-movement against established literature, and was opposed to authority and absolutism. As usual, the term eventually began to be misused, and was adopted in referring to the sort of ladies' gossip-writing commonly found in our patriarchal societies. Our patriarchal societies produce literature that mirrors their patriarchic nature. Literature need not be written by a man for this to happen; male writers can also write progressively, and there are female writers who are in agreement with the dominant patriarchal values. Personally, I have a deep fondness for the concept and term "feminist literature" in its original meaning: the idea of the marginalized standing up against oppression, absolutism, and the cycles of patriarchy that have ruled our behavior for so long. This is how I regard feminist literature. I reject, however - and I speak personally

here - the notion of equality. I have no desire to be on equal footing with men. I want to be different from men. What results from equality is the emergence of a sexless being. It is neither man nor woman. And, as I have not yet answered your question, the most important features of the feminine voice are women's understanding of themselves and their realization of the necessity for their own literary engagement in society. Due to cultural and societal developments, this newer voice has been able to transcend issues and ideas that women's writing had been trapped in. Women writing now are infusing these issues with deeper knowledge and creating a more comprehensive picture.

Faris: But the concept of equality between women and men is rather related to the political and legal dimensions of equality, whereas you are talking about this from a literary and poetic standpoint.

Abdalmohsin: It could be that the concept in itself stems from a patriarchal society and is also a patriarchal idea...

Rosa: Absolutely! What I am really talking about is writing, and not about the law. I am talking about equality in regards to masculine and feminine writing.

Abdalmohsin: Let us move on to the issue of censorship, which I believe is a natural product of patriarchal societies. I know your novel Abanus [Ivory], which won the Hanna Mina prize, has been subjected to patriarchal censorship, if one can call it that. Can we talk about this?

Rosa: My novel was not the only one that was subjected to change and omissions. In Syria, the censor is everywhere. There is surveillance on everything, from what you say to what you write, and on your being in general. This book may have been singled out because it was written



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by a woman, causing it to be subjected to a kind of double censorship. Despite the fact that the novel contained many dissenting political views (in my view), as well as a daring handling of the religious authorities. What was actually censored in Abanus were the sexual scenes. It also talked about the events of the 1980s in Syria, during the Lebanese Civil War. Yet, one should note that most of what was deleted had to do with sex, and this was definitely because it was in a book written by a woman. Huge numbers of books containing lascivious sexual scenes get translated from foreign languages in Syria and are printed without a single word being changed! Satellite channels, which are seen by everyone in Syria are filled with various objectionable scenes, but no censor has any problem with those. This kind of censorship is not a purely Syrian trait, as you both know, but is all over the Arab world. Although my novel depicts sex in relation to questions concerning existence and life, it was still censored. All authoritarian regimes adopt progressive slogans in defining their existence. These slogans, however, stand in stark contrast to their practices. I think - to continue the previous discussion about the features of my literary generation - my generations's focus is on exposing this kind of political, cultural and social oppression, and the mechanisms behind this oppression. Another trait shared by young women writers today is their breaking away from the sort of rigid portrayal of women that emerged in the 1960s, such as the chaste lover, the fallen woman, the wife, the mother and the fighter. The official institutions' opposition to feminist fiction precisely reflects the preconceptions prevalent in society. The saddest part of the story is that, completely inundated in patriarchal values and having surrendered to them, women themselves often become their own worst enemies. I am deeply saddened by this, and that is why I confront it in my writing.



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As I abandoned myself wholeheartedly to the beauty of the streets of Damascus, and as I went from place to place to meet with Syrian writers and artists, it happened one day that I began mulling over the problems to be faced in publishing and marketing our local literature, our Arabic language literature, especially in terms of the governmental (on the one side) and social (on the other) censorship we suffer from. I started to think about the criteria that determine the ideological, security, and bureaucratic models adopted by most Arab governments to control the mechanisms of cultural production and dissemination. They have managed - via educational, cultural, and media programs aimed at youthful audiences - to distort the planes of accepted artistic values, and interfere in the concepts and standards that distinguish literature from simple, cheap, and naive propaganda. The outcome has been that only one model of literature has dominated local production for decades. This one model is meant to support the power structure and ensure its survival. The result of this has been the creation of a "lead reader," naive, dominated, unquestioning, and uncritical, whose only knowledge of local literature is gained from books, magazines and newspapers which are produced by the government. Just before reaching the end of the street which led to the Umayyad Mosque, I was so caught up in thought about the immense losses caused by the lack of reading among Arabs today that I tripped over a ladder... luckily for me, I got up and discovered that such ideas had not done me much bodily harm.

- 3 Over the course of the many meetings I held in Syria, I noticed the increase of artistic associations and groups there, as well as the growth of local and foreign support for this kind of work, after many years where such support had been either non-existent or restricted to the government. I enjoyed a musical performance by a band there called Kaws Kuzah (Rainbow), which sang and played music from many different cultures. Together with the people on the street of Al-Saleheyya, I also attended a street performance by the French group Al-Muschah (The Pedestrians or, The Infantry) that was held during the course of the Silk Road Festival, organized by the French cultural center. The four members of the group, comprised of musicians, singers, and poets, walked around among pedestrians and shops, enveloping every element of the street, such as the sidewalk, the doors, and facades, in song and music. The audience said it had been the first time they had seen a show like that. Some time later, I was sitting in the Rawda café with some fellow Iraqis who had left Iraq years ago, and was heart-broken,

because a last minute change in our schedule had prevented me from meeting any Syrian poets. I also sat in the Nawfara café listening to a Hakawati (storyteller) telling his audience - mostly foreign tourists - tales of bravery and courage. The Syrian way of stretching out the ends of words fascinated me, and I liked to make fun of those who had become my friends for speaking like that. I very much enjoyed a musical that was held at the Opera House. At the Conservatory, Nizar Umran told me how there was no future for musicians who composed music without lyrics in Arab society. And the nicest person I met was our cultural guide, Rashed Issa!

*Abdulmohsin,
September 2005*

- 1 Once in Damascus, I felt that my trip had really begun. We had travelled there over land from Amman. After arriving in the city and getting out at Al-Baramki Square, we headed toward the Al Majid hotel at 9 May Street. The first dearly beloved person to receive us in the lobby of our hotel, shortly following our arrival, was the theater critic Rashed Issa, who served as our cultural tour guide, and provided us with a third eye in documenting our trip photographically. Greetings to Rashed!
- 2 Being in Damascus means recalling the city's long history, regardless of one's own stance or relationship to it. It is a city with its own obvious particularities, the most beautiful of which is its well-preserved architecture from across many epochs. I often crossed Damascus's old streets on my almost daily walk between Bab Touma (Thomas's Gate) and the Umayyad Mosque with a great sense of happiness which, unfortunately, was tainted by an old pain, brought on by my memories of, among other things, the complete destruction of the old structures in my own city, carried out under Republican orders. Its urban depth had always been a thorn in the side of those hard-liners among the now-deposed authorities. When walking through the alleyways of Damascus, I experienced an intensified sense of empathy with our poets and the sorrows they endured while standing over the ruins of their loved ones' encampments after having left them, and I was repeatedly compelled to recite the lines of their poems to myself. The people of Damascus did well by transforming many of the old Damascene houses into beautiful tourist attractions. Due to the city's numerous welcoming locations, we had the opportunity to distribute our meetings among the houses and apartments belonging to the city's intellectuals, but also among its restaurants, cafés, and public spaces.

3 The first thing I noticed in Syria in terms of culture was the impact that financial support provided by European non-governmental organizations seemed to have there, especially for artistic groups which are trying to make their ways onto the art scene; this allows for the production of many concerts, plays, and dance performances, and art exhibits. I also noticed that the “dramatic” political changes in Iraq and the Gulf region during the 1990s had made Syria, for many reasons, including its own initiatives, an attractive market for money coming from the Gulf and other countries, invested in television production, book publication and distribution. Its audio studios have also become the ideal place for translating and dubbing hundreds of animated films.

It is also evident that education, culture, and the media are completely directed and dominated by the state, and that censorship plays a large role. However, literature and art - due to their metaphorical abilities - enjoy a level of freedom and independence, even though limited, that allows the Syrian writer or artist to produce creative work.

In Damascus, I noted that there were young authors and artists who believe that culture - given freedom and support - is the shortest way to justice, goodness, and beauty. I found them endorsing the idea that humanism is the most precious value, that the world is open to all of humanity without discrimination, and that fixed ideologies are akin to prisons, working in no way as a means of emancipation. I saw that they aimed at instilling tolerance in themselves for “the Others,” (here, the West) and a belief that the best way to learn about this “Other” can be found in acculturation.



“THE TRIUMPH OF TELEVISION OVER CULTURE”

An Interview with the Palestinian Filmmaker Fajr Yacoub

Abdulmohsin: *The Syrian television drama series has achieved breakthrough success in that it has now become a serious competitor with its Egyptian counterpart, and is proving that Syria has excellent actors, scriptwriters, directors and technicians, and that the private sector is capable of producing important work. When will a similar development occur in Syrian cinema, which has produced important work in the past? We must not, of course, forget to mention the renowned Damascus International Film Festival. Is Syrian cinema facing a crisis at the moment?*

Fajr: Let us begin by remembering that there used to be a substantial private sector producing movies in Syria. Syrian cinema has certainly accomplished some good work, but the majority of movies produced were of low quality and trivial nature. If we want to discuss the Syrian film industry crisis in both the private and public sectors, we first need to consider the international developments that have taken place, and then the impact which they have had on Arab societies in general, including Syria. Syrian society was hit by a crisis, which was then reflected in the film industry. Due to social and economic developments internationally and in Syria, the middleclass has shrunk dramatically. Because the middle class was always the main supporter of the film industry - in producing movies as well as constituting the bulk of the audience - this development has led to the deterioration of that industry in Syria, and caused it to lose most of its cultural significance. Because the middle class was its main base, there is now a great deal of anxiety in the private sector about the risk involved in producing films. If you wanted to produce a commercial movie in Syria, where



would you find a market? Let us not talk about the illusion of there being an Arab market for film. What we generally see are fairly silly or even ridiculous movies, most of them Egyptian, along with a few others that are presented during festivals. There are also political hurdles related to censorship by Arab governments which fear the emergence of rebellious film directors within their own countries, who might try to incite their counterparts in other countries to follow their example. Another problem tied to the lack of a market for films is the resulting slowness of the financial flow within the industry itself. And finally, there is, of course, a funding problem.

Abdulmohsin: *How can these problems be solved?*

Fajr: In the past, Syrian cinema has produced some important movies and celebrated the achievements of significant directors. However, it is now suffering from a lack of funding. I am not really in any position to give advice, but this is how I view the situation: One can begin to look for overseas funding, from Europe for example, without having to worry about being considered a traitor. Filmmakers should and can easily find out about the sources of this kind of funding, what exactly is being offered, what duties would be demanded of them, and what kind of rights they would have. It is often said that outside funding should not be trusted, but it is possible to find out where resources are coming from. Another point is that we need to learn how to benefit from the technological revolution of the digital age. Today, it is possible to shoot an entire film on a digital camera and transfer it onto film, with very little expense, and with almost the same level of quality. Why do Syrian directors not take advantage of this? Why not leave their egos and arrogance behind and try using a digital camera? No one working in cinema today can close their eyes to the immense transformations taking place concerning the technology of the camera. Syrian filmmakers should take advantage of these, and if they truly are professional, they will be able to elevate their work to the high standards of filmmaking they have been dreaming about. These directors need to start producing cinema and stop simply talking about it, remaining sermonizers on cinema rather than directors of it. I see this kind of filmmaker as one who circles around the cinema instead of moving with it. If you are truly serious and careful about your project, you can make an entire movie using nothing but sticks and stones and a camera.

Abdulmohsin: *Let us go back to the question of the Syrian drama. Syrian drama production is huge. No satellite channel is devoid of a Syrian drama series. In the beginning, in the 1960s and '70s, we had the series model created by Durayd Lahham, followed by the emergence of different models in the 1990s resulting from political and social developments. Now there is a Syrian drama which is certainly on equal footing with its Egyptian*

counterpart, if not excelling above it artistically. An average of 160 million Arab viewers are beginning to take these Syrian productions seriously. What is your reading of these accomplishments, and what role does the Syrian drama series play in stimulating culture in Syria?

Fajr: I do not want to enter into a discussion about a competition between Egyptian and Syrian drama. What is more important is that, in my view, there is an unhealthy cultural situation prevalent in the Arab region in general. You have said that the private sector in Syria is capable of producing Syrian drama and that it can dominate numerous channels and attract many viewers. Let us expand this perspective by adding: there are some Syrian drama productions that indeed have had a great deal of success. The fact that these series have a huge audience does not translate into good quality and should not make us hail the drama series at the expense of film. I would like to repeat that we should be careful not to drown in illusions. The drama series is essentially a business venture. Large, powerful television and satellite stations which are mushrooming at amazing speed are working on solidifying the dominance of these kind of productions because they are profitable. These stations convince viewers of the significance of this kind of production simply by repeating the same pictures and issues over and over again. They achieve their goals with astounding success, and no one is able to stand up to them. As I mentioned before, there have undoubtedly been a number of superb series which have been produced for television. But television is essentially a faceless medium devoid of any language of its own. Its future is in the present. It seduces its viewers, encloses them, and feeds them bites, not just of drama, but also of sports, news, advertisement, music, business, economy, weather, and on and on. That is how viewers enter into a state of total relaxation and are overcome by laziness. I do not understand how 160 million viewers can applaud this kind of production. We cannot call this "culture." Culture is about diversity, not conformity. The level of viewer consensus on the value of single productions that we see today is a dangerous development and could lead to neo-fascism. It is dangerous when 160 million viewers all clap to the same beat. I do not want this number of people to clap to a single series nor to a single movie. What I look for is the individual viewer having his own perspective and interpretation. There is a solidification of consensus on cultural forms taking place, which cannot be considered as cultural in the first place, at the expense of real culture. Today, the triumph of television in Arab society has taken place at the expense of the genuine culture that is the book, the film, and the theater. It is these latter that a society can lean on. However, the absence of the middleclass in most Arab societies

- destroyed or aborted - has led to the absence of genuine cultural assets. I am forced to suffer the “culture” emitted by all those television channels in my own house. Nothing can oppose that kind of culture but a counter-one. But where is it? Who is responsible for its production?

I do not see any progress in what we are doing. What exists is the demise, if not the death, of true culture in the region.

Abdalmohsin: *I agree with you that television poses serious competition. Many publishers have told me that the most dangerous competitor today is the television. Personally, I do not consider television to be an art medium; it is a strange fusion of various forms. Cinema, for example, has its own rules, theories, and renowned figures, and theater is an art form in itself. Television is consumer-oriented. Its objective is to manipulate tastes and desires, allowing consumers to kill more time. I agree with you completely. I do not believe there is a magical solution to these problems, especially in the field of culture, which cannot be separated from the fields of media and education, starting with kindergarten and moving all the way up to universities. But what should be done? Are our hands tied?*

Fajr: There are no solutions. Nonetheless, culture is the last frontier; it is the only thing we have. We have lost militarily, financially, and economically. The only solution is to enforce culture, as it is the last bastion that we can lean on. Otherwise, the entire region, with its people, soil, and heaven, is destined for destruction, and heading toward hell. There are important developments taking place on the international



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scene, such as the restructuring of markets, and globalization. If we are to participate in this new world, we need to enter into it with a clear understanding of our own world, taking a stance on whether we see this globalization as being a savage force or a humanizing one. It is a flood on a global level. It is an informational, economic, social, and existential flood. Where are we in its midst? How can we protect ourselves from its negative effects? These are big questions that are difficult to answer. Exclusion might have been played out on regional levels in the past; now it is global. Since the entrance into the third millennium, we have not sent out any signals to indicate that we are conscious and awake. Our signals only indicate that we are in a mode of eternal relaxation. This means that we exist outside of time and place. Show me one sign to indicate that we are waking up from the nightmare, or that we are moving beyond the past! We have a nightmare, that is one thousand years old; I do not want to go back to the very beginning, to the first millennium, to the Silk Road, to the economic or cultural exchanges then, to astronomy, or to language and how Arabic began to influence other languages. All this is clear and obvious but part of the past. The second millennium is behind us, and we have not produced anything. We only copy things produced by others; we simply regurgitate them. We grew up with our big names, but now they too are regurgitating what the West has produced, spitting it out onto us. We are now in the third millennium and I do not know where our position is.

What is the position of the Arabs regarding the conflicts in Iraq, Palestine or Lebanon? They are competing to please Israel! These are not signals sent by a nation that is awake and has any knowledge of its own; it has nothing! It recycles information in a murky universe, in a fractured time that we have created ourselves. And then we talk about victories? There are no victories on any level.

*Diaries continue,
Abdalmohsin*

The people whom I interviewed (the publishers Louay Hussein - who had previously been imprisoned for his opinions - and Said Barghouti, the filmmakers Fajr Yacoub and Ghassan Abdallah, the musicians Husameddine Braymo, Jamal al-Saqqa, Rana Haddad, Yazn al-Sharif, and Wafa'a Safar, the novelists Rosa Yaseen Hassan and Khaled Khalifa, and the dramatists Faris al-Helou, Hala Umran, Nura Mrad, Ramzi Shukeir, Usama Halal and Marwan Adwan and others...) answered many of the questions I had had about the cultural realities in Syria, and many of them affirmed that the greatest problems facing cultural development there were posed by many of the country's institutions and their administrators, and the limitations

they imposed on artistic freedom. These institutions work without any clear agendas or strategic plans, and waste millions of Syrian pounds on inconsequential propaganda events. Most dangerous of all, however, is that those who run these institutions view culture and the arts as being frivolous luxuries, or simply complementary elements, as opposed to understanding them as a deeply rooted human necessity, or part of a universal and spiritual dialogue. A few of the artists (and I share their opinions) attributed deeper causes to the problems, claiming that they are part of a larger cultural dilemma, which we are experiencing in relation to identity formation, and which is intensified further as we develop our complex relationship to “the Other”.

“BOOKS ARE NOT REALLY PRESENT IN THE LIVES OF MOST SYRIANS”

An Interview with the Syrian Publisher Louay Hussein

Abdalmohsin: *Anyone following the news about the private publishing industry in Syria will have noted that it is active and flourishing at the moment. I believe that this is partly a result of the decline of Lebanese bookmaking, caused by the Lebanese Civil War, and of the international sanctions imposed on Iraq, and the subsequent changes there. Could you give me some general information about private publishing in Syria?*

Louay: I believe that the private publishing industry in Syria has made reasonable progress, but that the industry is still weak and success has been relative. Syria has a tradition of bookmaking. It has always had its own presses, and the printing houses in Syria are quite old. The private publishing industry, however, never used to have such a



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strong presence. When Lebanese presses were destroyed during the war, with Iraq not having much of a publishing industry to speak of, Syria was able to service the Middle Eastern and Gulf-country markets as the demand for books increased in many countries that had no bookmaking industries of their own.

Syrian publishing houses have not really seen any expansion, however, and their products have not been diversified. Most of their products are sold in the Arab market, but not necessarily in the Syrian one. Books are not really present in the lives of most Syrians, and they are given little attention. Most people do not know which book titles are even available; they may in fact have a better idea about who the writers are than about their work, because the writers appear on television from time to time.

Abdalmohsin: *Can you diagnose the most important problems facing Syrian publishers, and describe the publication process in Syria? Do you believe that there are internal reasons for these problems, related to the publishing industry itself, or are there external reasons?*

Louay: There are several problems of course. We used to think of publishers as agents of culture, free from profit-driven motives. Unfortunately, things have changed, and it has become common over the past two decades to think of publishers as merchants, or handlers concerned with profit. Many publishers, or at least most Syrian publishers, are uncultured people, and very few of them have any personal connection to books or reading. It must therefore be up to publishers to create a balance between simply being merchants and agents of culture. Publishing is a craft and a trade. Accordingly, publishers should be able to make a decent living from their work, just as any other tradesman should. They must also be able to offer quality products



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to society. So far, this two-sided equation has rarely been realized in Syria. There are a few cultured publishers who still work according to the old ideas and traditional values, but they tend to run out of work quickly, and are usually forced to close up their shops. This is how I view the state of the Syrian publisher. I cannot say for certain, but I think that this is also applicable to Arab publishers in general.

Another important aspect, however, is that Syria is missing the institutions required for large-scale publishing. Before the war, Lebanon had managed to create truly venerable publishing institutions, with management structures, financial support, and branches in other capital cities. In Syria, a large number of publishers release important books, but there are no facilities to produce and distribute them. Publishing here is dependent on individuals. If certain individuals stopped working, publication of much material would cease. I also think that there is a positive side to the lack of large institutions though. Due to the absence of rules and regulations, a number of publishers have dared to infringe upon copyright laws. This has allowed them to have more publishing opportunities and given them the freedom to translate a huge number of books. I do not blame them for doing this. I do not think that copyright fees should be paid to foreign writers by Arab readers or Syrian readers; they simply cannot bear the financial burden. This was an additional reason for the rise of Syrian publishing. Due to the absence of both publishing institutions and any legal constraints, the Syrian publisher was able to introduce globally renowned books to the market and to translate them into Arabic. It is also important to mention here that Syrian law does not force a publisher to pay copyright fees to foreign publishers, but states that publishers must pay copyright fees to Syrian or Arab publishers.

Abdalmohsin: *I would like you to tell me about your personal experiences in the field of publication. How did you start, what were the challenges and obstacles that you faced? What kind of books do you publish?*

Louay: Most of the books that I publish are theoretical, political or philosophical in nature, and, unfortunately, the market for such books is very small in the Arab world. These books are not as popular as novels in translation, or some of the religious books or simple books about astrology and personality types. The books that I publish are difficult to distribute, because it is usually only the elite who has any interest in reading such books. This is the problem in the Arab world with publishing books dealing with theoretical matters. Nevertheless, I have managed to publish a few books that have been successful. This makes me proud and gives me the feeling that my efforts have been worthwhile. Because I produce theoretical material, I have to ensure excellent quality in the content and appearance of the books.

This is the path that I am following now, and I am cooperating with other institutions, such as the Arab Association for Modernizing Ideas, set up in 2005 by an elite group of Arab intellectuals across the Arab world. Among those involved were Mohammad Arkoun, Nasr Hamed Abuzeid, and George Tarabishi, along with a number of other influential people. They select certain books and provide support for them, and I work with them on publication and distribution. There is also another association called the League of Arab Rationalists, which is concerned with publishing theoretical subject matter concerned with the lives of individuals, as opposed to abstract philosophy, and we have worked together on a few books that have been fairly successful. Because of this, I have decided to continue in this direction.

Abdalmohsin: *If books about palmistry, magic, astrology, spies, adventures, cheap erotic thrills, and celebrity biographies have become all the rage, who is responsible for the decline in reading standards? Is it the fault of publishers? Or the audiences? Or is it due to a failure on the part of governmental organizations such as educational, media, and cultural institutions?*

Louay: This question leads me to the main issue concerning Arab books. I have noticed that the subject is always discussed in terms of numbers, especially during book-fairs. The question posed is always about the number of books published and distributed. Almost immediately, journalists and others concerned with these issues begin to compare the numbers from the Arab book market with those of the Western books, particularly with those from nearby Western countries, such as Greece, Cyprus or even Israel. In such cases, we certainly notice the embarrassing discrepancy in figures. Only two thousand copies of Arabic books are made on average per edition. Many writers, particularly novelists, only print five hundred copies. At the same time, however, many Arab publishers have hundreds, if not thousands, of books that they were not able to sell, which are simply collecting dust in their warehouses. This is really a readership crisis.

Some people say that we are not a reading people. This is not because reading is not in our blood, however, or because we do not like to read. In my opinion, it is the Arab cultural and political elite, in addition to our governmental institutions who are at fault, because they do not encourage reading, or convince Arab individuals that it is necessary to read. It is their responsibility to encourage Arab (and Syrian) individuals to adopt their own ideas and beliefs outside of the school or university curriculum, allowing them to develop their own personalities, becoming more independent and freer-thinking individuals, and not just numbers.

The Arab individual, and particularly the Syrian individual, has no use for reading after completing their education. This, I believe, is due to the fact that we do not respect individualism. Anyone who goes against the majority's opinion is regarded as a disgrace, and sometimes even pushed out of society. We sometimes even make out those whose political opinions differ from the norm to be traitors. We doubt that such a person can be intelligent and cultured, and test them by seeing whether they have memorized everything we taught them during high school and college, and whether they are still abiding by these principles and endorsing them. If this is the case, we assume that they are very good people, qualified to assume posts, and deserving of respect. However, if they have strayed from the path, we simply ask, "Where did you get these ideas from?" as if it were wrong for someone to acquire ideas from sources outside of school textbooks, or information produced by the media and educational institutions in this country. We have simplistic and non-progressive values when it comes to books. When we use the word *books*, it is usually in reference to simple books that are easy to read, understand, and discuss. These are the most popular kind of books because such very simplistic, non-progressive values, such as the idea that people should read for half-an-hour before going to bed, as if taking a sleeping pill, or that books are intended as time-fillers or are mere sources of entertainment, were all promoted by us. People are often told, "Amuse yourself with a book." This is the value of books in our culture; we have assigned them with a completely banal function, as if they were something that could be replaced by television, or anything else. We do not consider books to be sources of knowledge, and we do not realize that a person can only form an opinion about the simplest everyday issues through knowledge. So, the readership crisis is a bigger issue than the publishing or distribution problems.

Abdalmohsin: What are the solutions to these problems then?

Louay: The solution to these problems will involve a great deal of time, during which the societal structures in our countries are rebuilt and transformed into democratic structures, not only in the sense of free elections. Democratic structure will encourage variety and multiplicity without any rejection of individuals on the basis of their standing outside of certain groups that might form the majority. People will then realize that there is a point to reading, and they will search for books that interest them. Solving this problem does not solely depend on societal changes, however. There are also technical solutions related to publishing that can make publishers' work more effective.

Here, the state should play a role. The state should at least subsidize publication, provide an environment conducive to marketing and

book-fairs, and lower taxes on paper. Paper in Syria is very expensive. The cost of books is highly dependent on the number of pages involved, and has little relationship to the ideas or culture represented. Here in Syria, an author makes very little profit from writing books. The state could help in a number of ways: by lowering taxes on paper, by possibly subsidizing paper imports, or by making paper importation more feasible. It could also lower the taxes on printing machines, better facilitating book distribution. The other thing that state institutions such as the Ministry of Culture must do is to stop spending money on festivals that have no use except for wasting money on unnecessary luxury hotel stays for artists. Money wasted in this way is allegedly spent in the name of culture but in fact is used merely to bolster the government's prestige. This money could be diverted into books. Reading in schools can be encouraged by setting aside reading hours and creating school libraries, or requiring elementary students to do extracurricular reading and discuss what they have read, as opposed to forcing them to read nothing but school books. We know that many of the so-called facts taught in schools are either outdated or falsely presented. Therefore, there is much that the government can do.

*Diaries continue,
Abdalmohsin*

Our trip to Damascus was especially pleasing to me for many reasons, including my reuniting with Iraqi intellectual and artist friends who I had lost touch with in the 1990s. I also got to know Iraqi intellectuals and artists who I had not been able to meet within the restricted Iraqi environment. The Rawda Café also holds an unforgettable place in my heart. It was not just a venue in which to meet up, but a space which brought together those separated from each other in public, something that people like me were longing for; the consecutive wars had robbed us of the feeling of having security in public places, and the dictatorship had divided us into isolated islands, as if its major concern was to strip us of any love for "the Other" and of sharing "the Other's" way of thinking and creating.

"The Other," in the dictatorial lexicon, meant any Iraqi artist or thinker that dreamt of freedom, may have caught a glimpse of it, pointed toward it, or strove to reach it. The dictator and his entourage mastered the art of subverting the creative Iraqi who was spreading the idea of freedom. Their undeclared policy was that "those creative Iraqis who were out of the country physically were also nonexistent for the country artistically." Therefore, we who were inside were starving for any possibility in which to learn about creative work produced by those who were forced into estrangement and exile. In their smuggled in works, we often found outlets for our pains of estrangement within

the homeland, and we, who had chosen the path of internal migration, a migration into our own souls, tried to emphasize in our evening discussions and dialogues that the concept of the internal and external intellectual and artist is devoid of epistemological content, and that the real measurement of the two sides is creativity itself. Before the collapse of their system, some of the authoritarians propagated the idea that the work of literary and artistic figures and thinkers who were pillars of the cultural scene – regardless of whether they were insiders or outsiders – was treasonous. Al-Jawahiri, for example, Mustafa Jamal al-Din, Bolan al-Haidari, Ali al-Wardi, Al-Bayati, ‘Aziz al-Sayyid Jasem, Sa’di Yusif, Muzaffar al-Nuwab and many others were subjected to the “artistically and creatively nonexistent” game, and were categorized as “traitors,” only because they were free, and free to be creative.

One last image

Place: Havana Café in Damascus. **Time:** One of the magnificent late September mornings. **Characters:** The great poet Muzaffar al-Nuwab who had spent more than half of his life away from his homeland Iraq; the poet, novelist and playwright Yousif al-Sa’igh, who had never left Iraq; my team and I, meeting to discuss the program. **Occurrence:** A reuniting of the two poets after the destruction of the dictatorship and the termination of its dark days. **Comment:** I honestly do not know whether it was my good or ill fortune, whether it was a matter of serendipity or simply a tragic coincidence that I happened to be present at the very moment that the late Iraqi poet, novelist, and playwright Yousif al-Sa’igh walked into the café to meet his old friend, the great poet Muzaffar al-Nawab, who had always spent his mornings in that café. They sat behind us, and their conversation was very intimate. My reading of their meeting was that creativity is what was eternal and that it was the greatest common denominator between two friends separated by exile and geography. Their meeting was the most credible proof for me that the notion of inside and outside is nonexistent between creative beings. To my great dismay, this was the last time I ever saw Al-Sa’igh alive! Yousif Al-Sa’igh died a few weeks after this meeting in Damascus at the age of 79 years.

BIOGRAPHIES

Rosa Yaseen is a Syrian writer and novelist who was born in Damascus in 1974. She graduated from the School of Architecture in Lattakia in 1998. Her first experiments with writing took place during her time as a student, in which she wrote a number of short stories, some of which won her the Arab Writers' Union prize in 1993 and 1994. In the year 2000, she published her first collection of short stories but then started to become more attracted to the novel. She participated in the 'Hanna Mina competition with her first novel, *Abanus* (Ivory), and was awarded the second prize. The novel was published and distributed by the Syrian Ministry of Culture in 2005. In 2006, she completed a manuscript titled *Nighaatii: Hikaayaat al-Mu'taqalaat al-Siyaasiyaat fii Sujuun Suuriyah* (Negative: Stories of Female Political Prisoners in Syria). Since 2000, Yaseen has been writing on cultural and women's issues in several Syrian and Lebanese publications, in addition to electronic platforms. She is a civil society activist and founding member of the Syrian NGO Women for Democracy.

Fajr Yacoub is a Palestinian filmmaker who has lived in Syria his entire life. He has made a large number of documentaries and short films, among them *Khud'ah Rabii'iyah* (A Spring Trick), *Saraab* (Fata Morgan), *Suurah Shamsiyah* (A Solar Picture), *Mataahah* (Maze), *Al-Bitriiq* (The Penguin), and *This is my Casablanca*. Yacoub also works as a film critic and has produced a number of books in this field, including *Jumhuriyat al-Tilfizyun* (The Republic of Television) and *Al-Wajh al-Saabi' lil-Sard* (The Seventh Face of Narration). Finally, he has translated a handful of books by filmmakers such as Pedro Almodovar, Akira Kurosawa, Martin Scorsese, and Federico Fellini (Ginger and Fred).

Louay Hussein was born in Damascus in 1960. While studying philosophy there, he was arrested in 1984 due to his affiliation with a communist party. After seven years, he was released from prison without trial. When Syria became more liberal regarding freedom of speech he started writing political articles for several Arabic newspapers, the most significant of those including the Lebanese dailies Al-Safir, Al-Hayat, Al-Nahar, and Sada al-Balad. He also reopened Petra for Publications, a publication house that he had established shortly after being freed, but that he had later been forced to shut down. Hussein currently publishes books on politics and theory, and has written a book titled *Al-Faq'd* (The Loss). He has contributed to the publication of two other books: the first with a group of Syrian thinkers and writers called *Hiwaaraat fii l-Wataniyah s-Suuriyah* (Dialogues on Syrian Patriotism), and the other titled *Al-Ikhtiyaar al-Dimuuqraatii* (The Democratic Choice) with the Syrian intellectual, Burhan Ghalioun.

Ankara/Istanbul

Writing Left, Writing Right

*Abdalmohsin,
October 2005*

1 Faris and I, along with our two German colleagues, had intended to make the journey from Damascus to Aleppo by train, and had planned the trip with great excitement and enthusiasm, especially because it would have been the first opportunity we had had to travel by train on our journey. Unfortunately, a work-related emergency arose which caused us to miss the train. We ended up renting a minivan to take us to Aleppo. I really suffered on that trip. We spent a night at the Baron Hotel, dating back to colonial times, which had once enjoyed a great deal of fame. I still clearly remember how the manager ordered a busboy - in a tone filled with pretension and boastfulness - to take us on a tour of the hotel and show us the rooms that various famous people had stayed in, such as the one in which Gamal Abdel Nasser had slept in and in which he had met the late Sheikh Zayed al-Nahayyan together with a number of other Arab leaders on some political occasion that I have since forgotten (probably it was one of the numerous Arab summits!). He also showed us the room in which the famous singer Farid al-Atrash preferred to stay in, along with many others. A strange coincidence then decreased my suffering on that trip: I was placed in a room next to the one in which the mysterious Lawrence of Arabia had stayed for a long period. This vicinity triggered many feelings, contemplations and thoughts. I began to wonder, for example, about whether the skills and qualifications - no matter how elevated - of one single person can be sufficient to entitle him to create policies, draw borders, establish monarchies and states, shake norms, and introduce changes, especially in the event that he or she is a stranger to the land involved, its language,



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and the history of its people. I remember that I wrote down some of these thoughts and reflections that night, and it may be that they will one day be made public. We did not spend a lot of time in Aleppo, however, which I regret, especially because I was not able to explore the city. After having made reservations through a travel agency, our trip to Turkey began – along with a strange adventure!

- 2 On the break of a cold autumn dawn, our brains still addled with sleep, we left the Baron Hotel. I was carrying some of my bags, and dragging the others behind me, including a large suitcase belonging to one of our companions, as we headed towards what we believed to be the agency to take the bus toward Anatolia, leaving Syria through the Bab el-Hawa border. Our fellow passengers amounted to fifteen, and there were quite a few women among them. Most of the passengers' faces made me uncomfortable, and a strange movement began on the bus as soon as they came on, a kind of energy and sequence of events that could only be described as not quite right. All of this was going on at dawn, without your comprehension, and any questions you asked were met with hypocritical smiles or blank faces. Before we got to the border, one of the passengers (I think he was the bus-driver's assistant) gathered up our passports in order to get them stamped with exit visas. After more than half-an-hour's wait in the bus, one of "them" rushed up to us asking Faris and me to come to the main office. This, of course, was done wearing the usual officious smile. Many questions later, which Faris and I as Iraqis had got used to at borders, I realized from their words and their gestures that the officer in charge and his bunch had got more than what they had wanted, but that the officer was going on to warn the others about the restrictions on the other side, and how the search patrols there had increased, frequently repeating the word "army". It was then that my suspicions were confirmed: our "travel and tourism" agency was in fact a "tea and sugar (and other products whose prices varied in both countries) smuggling" agency! After crossing the Syrian border, we drove extremely slow down a dusty winding road where I noticed young shepherds with their flocks perched high up on the surrounding hills. Our driver suddenly brought the minivan to a halt; he had seen a Turkish tour bus. Most of the passengers got out, and began lengthy negotiations with the Turkish bus driver, who refused to place their smuggled goods into his truck and take them back with him to Aleppo, because he thought that the Syrian side would be quick to search him. I noticed that the drivers of buses containing smuggled goods were communicating in a secret kind of sign-language, and I tried to interpret what they were saying as I watched. Finally, at our expense, their failure turned into a success; our bus crew pretended that the van had broken down and that they would not be able to take us to Anatolia. After many minutes of tension, which almost spilled over into violence, and extraordinary effort (particularly on the part

of Faris), we forced them to give us a partial refund and ensured that one of them would accompany us. I cannot describe our surprise on discovering that the only real passengers had been the four of us, and one other young European man who had also been duped! The five of us, along with our luggage and the man who was to accompany us, were all stuffed into a small Fiat taxi, which then drove us across the Turkish border, where we witnessed many army patrols confiscating smuggled goods and sorting them by content. I saw more than ten towering piles. That exhausting trip left a deep sorrow within me concerning the misery of the human condition in our Arab world, and a deep disdain for regimes that think only of their own survival, and live inside the dreams of their ideologies and not among their realities!

- 3 We arrived in Ankara, which I perceived to be a governmental city. It is a city of bureaucrats and employees where most of the country's politicians and decision-makers live. The city and its people radiate professionalism. Unlike Istanbul, life in Ankara does not engender any element of fantasy, to quote a line from Hassan al-Rimawi, that wonderful son of Gaza, who outdid himself as an interpreter for us in our conversations with Turkish intellectuals, despite his having plenty of other work. We held many of our meetings with poets and critics at the Angru (one of the old names for Ankara) café, which is frequented by many Turkish writers, artists, and journalists, in Connor Alley on Kusal Street. I met the poet Bulent Kilig and the critic Celal Inal there, along with many others. What really astonished me was that most of those whom I interviewed were Marxists, and often warned me, as if I could understand Turkish, against "the Writers of Darkness," a group of Turkish critics to appear after the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern bloc, and who re-evaluated popular understanding of contemporary Turkish literature. Celal Inal, editor of a book called *Democracy and Culture* told me, "they have counterfeited our literary heritage using bastardised vocabulary. We have now started to think about the mistakes made in our past literary phase and have begun to establish a new phase with a new vision." Of course, by "bastardised," he meant that they had used terms which were not Marxist. At a nearby café, called Bedra, in the basement of a large building overlooking "Lover's Lane," I met with the poet Ahmet Telli, who is believed by many Turks to be the most promising Turkish poet at the moment. He has twelve works in all which have been published, nine books of poetry, two books of criticism, and a book of Kurdish literature which he translated. Telli spoke extensively about Turkish poetry, and confirmed the extent of the influence which Arabic poetry has had on Turkish, Persian and Kurdish literature. At the same café, I spoke with a number of other writers, including the poet Mehmed Ozer, one of the founders of the anti-globalization oriented East/Sharq organization, which organizes

large conferences for intellectuals from Turkey, Iran, Armenia, Syria, Egypt and Iraq, bringing them all together to discuss and support Middle Eastern causes. My visit to the grave of Kemal Atatürk is one experience which will remain for a long time in my memory. I would like to thank Youssef al-Shanti for suggesting that we visit the memorial and for supplying us with information about it and about that Turkish leader to whom it was dedicated.

“THE FREE MAN WHO REJECTS IMPERIALISTIC IDEAS HAS BECOME THE MAIN SUBJECT OF MY POETRY”

An interview with the Turkish Poet Ahmet Telli

Abdalmohsin: *I would like you to give us a general idea about the tendencies in Turkish poetry today, and the direction that you are following in your work.*

Ahmet: There are three main trends in Turkish poetry today. The first is modern, with features similar to those of European poetry. It is essentially influenced through contact with the West, especially Europe. The second trend is in a traditional mode, which I believe is strongly influenced by both Arabic and Persian poetry, and reflects the Eastern world and its atmosphere. The third poetic trend is folkloristic, reflecting local customs, traditions and popular Turkish sayings. I personally try to fuse the three. My poetry presents a linking force between these separate elements. Lately, I have undergone some changes and have started to follow a new direction in writing poetry, which I like to describe as “attributive poetry.” This shift was influenced by the following: there was a large government-sponsored conference in Antioch (southern Turkey), entitled “The Meeting of Civilizations.” It was part of an attempt at encouraging religious tourism, and representatives from many different religions attended. I, however, viewed the event from another angle. Antioch is a meeting place for many different religious and ethnic groups: Turks, Syrians, Arabs, Yazidis – the city embraces them all, and they all can be seen there living in peace and harmony together. This peaceful co-existence, however, has existed in the region for hundreds of years, bound by a culture of brotherhood and love. Why, then, do so many people fight each other today? What are they fighting over? What are the reasons that prohibit peaceful co-existence, and what can we do about this? I believe that the primary cause is neo-imperialism and the goals it tries to achieve. This “imperialism” has emerged with a new face and name – globalization, with its slogans of creating one world, one shared knowledge, and one language – and it is propagated and directed by the United States of America. In the past, imperialists caused years of wars and triggered civil wars. Today, they are engaging in a different

kind of destruction, the destruction of peoples’ culture and cultures opposed to their own. The painful truth is that these national and ethnic cultures will not be able to resist the pressure for very long. Nonetheless, the feeling of losing their basic senses of identity makes them stick even harder to them, and they become willing to resort to violence if necessary. That is why the free man who rejects these imperialistic ideas has become the main subject of my poetry.

Abdalmohsin: *What are the major characteristics of Turkish poetry?*

Ahmet: My belief is that Turkish poetry is unique, even on an international level, because it constitutes a point of exchange between the East and the West. Goethe wrote his book entitled “West-Eastern Divan,” in which he integrated lines and ideas by the famous Persian poet Hafiz Al-Shirazi, among others, into his own poems. Turkish poets follow a similar path by reviving the same general idea and rewriting Eastern and Western poetry in Divan form. I also believe that Turkish poetry is special because of its flexibility and different forms and shapes, unlike the current kind of rigidity that is prevalent in Western works of poetry. Poets in Europe are concerned with improving and perfecting their work, whereas poets here are not subject to the same kind of pressure. Poets here want to write poetry with no boundaries to freedom or imagination. By the way, the resistance on the part of the Palestinians, Lebanese, and Iraqis is a great source of inspiration to Turkish poets.

Abdalmohsin: *International poetry, in general, is experiencing a crisis in relation to audience and reception. Do you see Turkish poetry undergoing a similar trail?*



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Ahmet: We have to understand, first of all, that the popularity and wide circulation of certain cultural forms does not necessarily translate them into an artistic boom, or being of cultural value. There are many deceptive faces of “culture,” which we must be careful not to be allured by. It is true, of course, that poetry readers are few in numbers, and that there is no big interest in this kind of artistic work, which can, admittedly, be frustrating at times. Poetry, however, is not meant to attract the most possible readers. There are other art forms that are directed toward large groups of people – the masses – such as music and cinema. A singer, for example, wants thousands, if not millions to listen to them. This does not hold true for poetry, however. Even when poetry is recited to large audiences, it does not contain the ambition to unify the opinions of all those present. Each person is free to interpret and taste it for themselves.

Abdalmohsin: *Poetry in Turkey – is this more of an artistic phenomenon, or does it represent a movement, led by certain poets (Nazim Hikmet, for example), which has its own characteristics?*

Ahmet: Categorizing poetry through its dissection into rigid elements and strict forms is, in my view, a futile undertaking. This kind of categorization goes back to the nineteenth century and is found especially in the work of bourgeois literary historians, work which usually represents the official viewpoint. I am against dividing poetry along thematic lines, such as love, resistance, folklore etc., which is more of an official kind of categorization than an artistic one. We have to look at poetry from a humanistic perspective, and be able to take a look at the situation and condition of the human being, at the conditions which have been achieved, and at those which are desirable. “Reading” poetry this way allows it to spread its colors, odors, and emotions. I remember a poem by Nazim Hikmet entitled “Letter to my Wife,” which he wrote while awaiting his death sentence. Through his words, he was objecting to the idea of the death sentence, to depriving a human being of the right to live. At the same time, he was furious at our world and what has become of us today. We can feel and live his sentiments while reading the poem. It is also a poem that expresses the essence of Hikmet at that time. Categorizing such a poem would rob it of its beauty and the different messages it contains.

Abdalmohsin: *Is there a young Turkish poetry movement at the moment? If there is, what are their interests and their vision?*

Ahmet: Of course. There is a young poetry movement that is increasing in numbers, and we have outstanding work from poets such as Hussein Ferhat, whom I call the “poet of the new dream,” or Iskendar Al-Sagheer, the “rock” poet, or Kemal Barul, a poet who fuses tradition with moder-

nity, or Shukri Irbash, the critic and objector. There are many others ranging in age between thirty and forty. In the past, there used to be a generational conflict among Turkish poets. There were different camps: organized poets or groups against individuals, modernists against traditionalists, etc. Today, this is not the case anymore. There is a rapprochement between different poets and a general understanding of the direction any given poet might choose.

Diaries continue, Abdalmohsin

Istanbul is a cosmopolitan city, in every sense of the word, and is a major tourist city. I, coming from a city on the edge of the desert, spent a lot of time standing on its shores. In Istanbul, I was lucky enough to be able to visit its annual international book-fair, its visual-art biennale, and many private cultural centers such as Biksaf, Teatro Oyonfi, and others. There, we met up with the thinker Zakaria Bayaz, with whom we discussed the relationship between Islam and the West, as well as problems related to identity in Islamic societies resulting from their histories and relationships to the West. I also met the filmmakers Hussein Karabi, whose film *Boran* has won many awards, and Yeshim Ostaoglu, who made the film *Journey to the Sun*, which has received over twenty local and international awards. In addition to the two of them, I also met Nezmi, the critic Vecdi Sayar, and the political analyst and dissident Faik Ballout, with whom we thoroughly discussed the Kurdish problem in Turkey, and the repercussions of the Iraqi Kurdish experience in Turkey. He impressed us with his Arabic language skills, stressing his worries about the issue of minorities in the Middle East. I also met with the dramatists Maher Kinshiari and Nurtan Baydmir, the painter Ahmad Ot, the writer Abdel Kader Yusharikun, and many others. Abdel Salam al-Sultan, our guide in Istanbul, played a major and much-appreciated role in facilitating communication between ourselves and those already mentioned. In Turkey, I was able to forget my regret at having missed the Damascus-Aleppo train, because Faris and I took the train from Ankara to Istanbul. These were some of the most enjoyable hours of the entire trip!

“MY COUNTRY’S CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS TO BOTH THE WEST AND THE EAST ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT”

An interview with the Turkish Critic Vecdi Sayar

Abdalmohsin: *Do you think that the principle problem facing art and literature in Turkey today is freedom of expression, and that political topics such as minority-rights, for example, are still taboo?*

Vecdi: At present, there are both positive and negative developments affecting Turkish art and literature. There are fewer hurdles today with regard to freedom of expression, and the number of cultural events taking place has increased. Turkey has its specific and sensitive problems and issues where lines are drawn, such as the Kurdish or Armenian issues. But recently, a number of important books on the Armenian and Kurdish cases were published, and it is permissible today to give concerts or produce music in Kurdish. Some of the taboos of the past are being broken, and we need to point out this positive aspect in our discussion. But there are still serious boundaries to freedom.

My country has undergone several military coups, after which heavy censorship was imposed on artistic work, in the field of filmmaking, for example. Today, censorship is less severe, but it is still exercised to some extent on non-mainstream films, and to a larger extent on literature, as is exemplified in individual cases where the courts have prohibited the distribution of certain books. All those engaged in the field of art and culture, however, are working and fighting to get these restrictions lifted, as we believe in the absolute freedom of thought and expression. I believe that we are now witnessing rather what I would call “economic censorship,” with the exception of a few independent authors who have been able to find sufficient financial resources to print and publish their work. Real “economic censorship” is applied to theatrical pieces and films, which are naturally more costly to produce. This explains why many artists have turned to popular forms of art that are less costly and easier to produce. Non-commercial art is very difficult to produce, which is a pity, especially because we happen to have a superb generation of young film directors at the moment.



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Abdalmohsin: *We noticed in some of our interviews that the cinema seems to be undergoing a crisis. In your opinion, is it a crisis related to directors, an economic issue, a censorship issue, or does the problem lie with scriptwriters? What are the reasons for the decline in the standards of Turkish cinema?*

Vecdi: Today, prizes of many international film festivals are won by young Turkish directors, and their work is of very high quality indeed. The problem is that a large number of these pieces do not reach the wider public. Those that appear to have the widest circulation and enjoy the greatest popularity are the comedies which are designed to attract large audiences. In fact, this trend appears to be found worldwide.

Since the last military coup in 1980, art in Turkey has lost its political dimension, despite the fact that artists are focusing on more difficult and complex themes. The problem is that many artists are working according to media directives, and answering to the demands of the television channels and the broader public. Those responsible for this trend are the media institutions themselves, which do not encourage diversified or non-mainstream productions, and the government. Our public education system needs to take part of the blame, as it does not produce adequately qualified, ambitious young people, and art-education in schools is not adequate. Then there is the funding problem. The State does not offer enough funding for more sophisticated and non-commercial art. The funds that are available are not being correctly distributed. When we look at Europe, we see many serious attempts at producing theatrical pieces and films, and the state supports these activities. In Turkey, there are many young film directors and theater groups, but they face mounting pressures and difficulties in continuing their work. The State should play an active role here by providing funds, but its role should be limited to



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this task. The Independent Arts Council, which I represent, is an umbrella organization for one hundred artistic groups including unions, institutions and art associations. I believe, it should be artists who nominate their own committees to distribute funds, and not the State, as is usually the case. The role of the State should be similar to that in Europe, where the state's influence on art does not go beyond funding. I would also like to see the government lift all political pressure as well as censorship on all forms of art and culture.

Another problem that plagues cultural development in my country is the fact that interest in artistic activities and in funding them is found only in Istanbul and Ankara, and we do not see this growing in the rest of Turkey. No big role or significance is assigned to art in other parts of the country, and art is not present in the lives of many people. This is a big problem. I, for example, head a cultural association that organizes art exhibits in most of the cities in Anatolia, but we suffer from a lack of state funding. It is human nature to choose the easiest solution, meaning that no effort will be made by the people to experience art and culture if cultural activities are not offered in their immediate surroundings. I am an architect, and we had a maxim at our university saying that when people wanted to go from one place to another, they would always choose the short-cut. In other words, art and culture needs to be taken to the people in every corner of the country. It is the duty of the central and local governments as well as the private sector to support these activities.

I would like to add something: many of the current developments, trends, and problems in art and culture are a result of the free market economy that we are asked to accept as the one and only. Many important issues related to this field are overlooked due to the market system's prioritization of profit, and it is here that the State needs to interfere and protect art and culture. An open system allowing everything is regarded as being better than a tyrannical regime that directs art according to specific directives and regulations. In the end, however, we can see that there is no big difference between the two systems when we look at the results. Look, for example, at former Socialist countries where artists used to complain about their limited freedoms of expression. And what is happening now? We find that their greatest artists are incapable of freely producing their work because the system has switched to an open-market system governed by trade rules and profit.

Abdulgohsin: In face of this bleak picture then, how do you see the future of art and culture in Turkey?

Vecdi: I am optimistic because – as I said before – we have talents capable of producing good and new work, and problems challenge our ingenuity. There is also another important point that needs attention. When Turkey became a Republic, modern Western art was introduced and taught in schools. These art forms, however, were disconnected from traditional Turkish forms of art. I believe that we should not only direct ourselves towards the West; we also need to present Eastern art – engage in a kind of balancing act and develop an intercultural vision. In this way, my country's cultural relationship to both the West and the East are equally important. There is a gap, however, regarding our knowledge of and exchange with the Eastern artistic and cultural world. We in Turkey need to get more acquainted with Arab, Iranian and other Eastern artists and their works. I believe that Turkish artists are earnest in wanting to reach out to them. I also believe that art can be an efficient tool with which to ensure peace and solidarity in our region. Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to express my deepest-felt regards to our brother and sister artists and writers in Iraq, who are experiencing immense hardship.

*Diaries continue,
Abdulgohsin*

I thought about Turkey as a bridge between Islam and Europe in the same way that I had thought about Lebanon from afar, as a bridge between the Arabs and Europe.

*Faris, October
2005*

¹ We crossed into Turkey by land going through Aleppo, Syria. At the border, I witnessed Syrian "Socialism" being smuggled into Turkey in the form of black bags filled with tea and sugar. Once on the road to Antioch, I began to ponder over the passionate embraces which are always exchanged at the borders between free-market and state-controlled economies.

We arrived in Ankara on the night of October 11, 2005. By the dawn of the next day, my friend Abdulgohsin and I found ourselves in a garden, thick with trees and flowers, and paved with marble walkways. At the entrance, soldiers stood statue-like at attention. This was the burial place of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Among the trees, aligned like the soldiers and black statues among them, beneath an enormous flagpole bearing the Turkish flag, our guide Youssef al-Shanti, of Palestinian origin, spoke to us about the great popular appeal of Atatürk. As I smiled at the camera, while having a picture taken of me in front of the very carriage that had

carried the celebratory cannon on the day of Atatürk's burial, I heard the sound of an old Turkish woman whispering nearby. Youssef al-Shanti quickly translated her words, passionate words of gratitude and blessing for the departed leader's soul.

Naturally, I could not help but to make the usual comparisons, whether detailed or brief, realistic or exaggerated, with what I had been seeing in the various countries I had been visiting and all that I had left behind in my own country, or at least with what I remembered of how it used to be. On leaving his place of burial, I could not help but noticing that my admiration for Atatürk and the position he still occupies in the hearts of many people was marred by doubts. I soon realized that these doubts had arisen because I had ignored in my thoughts the numbers of dead on which the nationalist leader's power had rested. The voices of the massacred, and the pains of their wives and children became audible deep down within me. I am not sure whether it was due to the complex nature of the period from which Atatürk and the few other nation-builders like him had arisen, or whether it was simply due to the standards of the time, that the bridges across which people could guiltlessly express their devotion to those leaders could be built. Of course, I was aware of the fact that I am particularly sensitive to any popular manifestations of support for one man, especially because I had just left a country where, for the past thirty years, under governmental orders, pictures of the same man had been displayed along the streets in increments of fifty meters. Yet, as the days went by in Ankara and then in Istanbul, and as I continued to stare at Atatürk's white teeth, shining out of the photographs of him hung in cafés, I was not able to avoid thinking of the great political, cultural, and social break that the man had made with the Ottoman past, meaning: with the immense laboratories of political Islam that the East had known for the last thousand years. This break had opened up the horizon for great transformations in the understanding of Islam and the role played by it in everyday life, politics, culture, and society. It leads to a "modern" interpretation of Islam, more in touch with science. This in turn contributed to the formation of a new generation of "modern" Muslims, a "modern" Muslim culture, and a "modern" way of interacting with the world, somewhat resembling the change brought about by the reformation in Germany concerning the Christian world's attitude toward science five hundred years ago.

What the theology professor and well-know media figure in the field of contemporary Islam Zakareyya Bayaz of the University of Marmora told us when we met him two weeks after having visited Atatürk's burial place had a great impact on my friend Abdulmohsin and me, not because of anything particularly shocking in his ideas (we had already encountered such concepts in Arabic books in the past), but

because it revealed to what great extent his "Islamic" society was open enough to allow for debates about ideas that would never even be mentioned on the airwaves of any Arab country today. As I thought about the way such debates have remained completely forbidden in our Arab societies, I began to feel slightly ill, and the voices of the victims which had taken hold of me at Atatürk's grave fell suddenly silent. On driving once more past the expansive grounds in which Atatürk's remains were buried, I turned to my friend Abdulmohsin, and asked him whether he thought that, during our lifetimes, we would ever experience the debate we had so been longing for over religion in our societies. He did not reply, and contented himself with staring out of the car window and appraising the city's beauty. I then asked our driver to stop at the nearest pharmacy.

- 2 After we had left Atatürk's burial grounds and sat ourselves down in the nearest café, I began to detect the smell of Stalinist Communism. I had noticed from the start that it had been very difficult to speak of art and literature in any way removed from political ideology in Turkey. I also knew, from my discussions with Turkish intellectuals, that, for them, a description of the situation in Iraq as "an example of the global hegemony of capitalism" sufficed to define what was taking place there. For them, the ideal position was to support "the revolution," represented by the "resistance to the occupation," even if that resistance had already taken on - for the most part - a religious form which considers anyone opposing it to be nothing but infidel. In my opinion, the important position the Palestinian cause occupies within most Turks was partly behind such thinking. On hearing a Turkish poet describe the Iraqi resistance as an anti-capitalist struggle, because it targeted "America," I quickly sensed the old "friend-enemy" dialectic at work.



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We spent three days in Ankara and then went to Istanbul. It was at that time that two-thirds of the Iraqi electorate had voted for the new constitution. It did not take much effort to find a little piece of Ankara among Istanbul's intellectuals, meaning the same kind of support for the "fighting" in Iraq. This stance was in ignorance of the fact that most Iraqis were engaged in peaceful resistance, and there was no consideration for the number of victims involved, simply because "capitalism is coming to take over the Middle East via Iraq." I was repeatedly astonished to find that, though nine-tenths of the people there were completely ignorant of any affairs to have taken place in Iraq before 2003, and their minds were therefore filled with nothing but abstract thoughts, they debated with us filled with certainty. The fact that I was someone with first-hand experience concerning Saddam's regime and the occupation proved useless in such debates, especially because my experience placed 2003 into its historical context, and my vision was opposed to their "proletarian" dreams. The most shocking moment came when a Turkish journalist confessed that she longed for the return of Stalin, and that three quarters of Iraq's population should be tried for treason. Another time, as I was finishing a discussion with a young filmmaker, he whispered to me that democracy was an imperialist lie and that the revolution would begin from within Turkey. I asked him, "What revolution?" He looked around carefully before whispering: "The revolution of the poor." Not surprisingly, Islamist intellectuals also said many of the same things, simply put into different words.

From one encounter to the next, it became clear to me that there was a prominent cultural trend in Turkey in opposing Western cultural values, especially globalization and liberalism. This trend supports the idea of a Western-Eastern Turkey, as opposed to Turkey being completely absorbed by the West. To Islamist intellectuals following this trend, the "East" should represent Islamic values ("traditional" or "modern"), while to Communist intellectuals it means proletarian, internationalist ones. In Turkey, political problems of a nationalist nature, such as the Kurdish and Armenian issues, with time have become the ideological prefaces to works of art and literature. These therefore tend to embody populist aspirations and are infused sometimes with Communist ideology and at times with Islamist ideology. Perhaps this explains why my interviewees rarely spoke of personal or individual problems, the one exception to this being the poet Aydin Shimshik, who was not particularly concerned with being celebrated by his readers, and insisted on the value and importance of going to the bottom of the self in writing.

- 3 As I write these words, I am still grateful for the opportunity I had while in Istanbul to see the band Replicas in concert. In the days following

the show, the band's music remained with me, causing me to think painfully about how many of the great artistic innovations of this world get lost in the great chaos of peoples, cultures and languages. Their music experimented boldly with the possibilities created by mixing Turkish music with western musical influences - although, due to my ignorance of recent Turkish musical trends, I am not sure whether others had already experimented in the same way before them. In their music, which I still listen to from time to time, I sense a sincere attempt to create entertaining yet complex music.

The fact that most of the art and literature which I saw in Ankara and Istanbul attempted to convey ideology does not reflect in any way poorly on the level of artistic innovation there. This is true, despite my feeling that there were always ideological fences that artists were not able to overcome and which surrounded much of their work, or at least that these ideological ideas had been put ahead of any artistic considerations that might have stood in contrast to them. I found great pleasure in watching a play by the actor and director Mahir Gunshiray, even though I got the feeling that the play had been written simply in order to transmit a political message.

I strolled down Istanbul's Independence Boulevard every day, lost in the daily crowds of people of all sorts, staring at the cultural and historical blend of the city's buildings. I noticed the strong presence of Marx in Turkish society in witnessing three separate demonstrations held by young Communists which took place on that street within those few days. At that point, I remembered the "Socialism" at the Syrian-Turkish border, and that I had left a place where political ideology amongst young artists and writers had been crumbling, only to find it dominating the work of people in Turkey to such an extent that anyone speaking about their art and work had been obliged to present their ideological stance before doing so.

"HOW CAN I GUARANTEE THAT INFORMATION ON PLACE OF ORIGIN BECOMES SECONDARY TO MY NAME?"

A statement by the Turkish Artist Ahmet Ögüt

I have only been living in Istanbul now for two years. Originally I am from Diyarbakir, a city in the south-eastern part of Turkey near the Syrian border. I moved to Istanbul after having finished my university studies in Ankara.

[...]

If you asked me why I moved to Istanbul, my answer would be that I wanted to pursue my goals in the arts. I discovered that I needed to relocate and become a kind of nomad in order to understand myself and the issues that occupy me better.

[...]

My projects are related to my past life experience. I have also focused on depicting the relationship between the private and public spheres, and concentrated on this relationship in my piece "Someone Else's Car." It revolves around two abandoned cars which had been parked in the street. I turned one of the cars into a police car and the other into a taxi - we transformed these cars within about ten minutes time, using cardboard and tape. In doing this, we turned them into objects that service the public sector, making them symbols of that sector. Objects from the private sector stand privately in the public street, and are things that we are not supposed to touch. Transforming these objects reveals part of a symbolic system that we have implicitly accepted. I often think about how to locate my position, as an individual who lives and produces art in the city, inside this symbolic system, accepted by us as if it were real, although it is not. I attempt to investigate these issues.

[...]

Another recent work of mine is a book called *The Book of the Lost World*. It is a collection of images related to my own personal experiences, and things that I have lived through which have left their traces on me. Other images in that book deal with the exaggerated stories that adults used to tell about the political developments which took place during my childhood in Diyarbakir at the beginning of the



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1990s. Those were very intense and difficult times. The book can therefore be considered a kind of post-traumatic piece. How did this era affect the following generations? What has disappeared? And what is still present in their memories? These are questions that the book tries to address. It is an attempt at visualizing an unwritten story, putting together the puzzle of remembrance, and recalling incidents that were slowly fading from memory. That is why images were sufficient, and the book is devoid of text. My reason for giving the book a three-dimensional form, similar to those found in children's books, was my wish to lend it beauty, even though disturbing stories are hidden behind this beauty!

[...]

There is a dangerous tendency to place the identity of artists from the Middle East at the forefront, to define them in terms of national artistic projects and concepts, or to view them from an orientalist perspective. In order to counteract these tendencies, artists need to come up with their own defense strategies. As an artist, how can I devote myself to my work and my cause, and at the same time guarantee that information on my place of origin becomes secondary to my name? How can I avoid this kind of stamping? This is a great battle... Certain regions often become artistically fashionable for the West. Over the past three years, there has been a special interest in the Balkan region, where numerous activities were undertaken. Now this interest is shifting towards Asia; maybe at a later stage, the Arab countries will take their turn. Artists need to make sure that they not turn into mere figures who surface suddenly, along with the wave of interest, but quickly vanish the moment the wave breaks. The subordination of artists to their national identities should never be allowed to take place and must be opposed.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ahmet Telli was born in Eskipazar, Turkey in 1946, studied at Hasanoglu and Pazaroren schools and obtained a university degree in literature from the Gazi Education Institute. He worked for a period of time as a teacher until running into political problems with the Turkish authorities after the military coup in 1980. Today, Ahmed Telli is one of the most important poets in Turkey. For his poetry, he received the Toprak poetry award (1980) and the Yazko poetry award (1982). Some of his most famous poetry books are “Yangýn Yýllarý” (1979), “Dövüþen Anlatsýn” (1980), “Su Çürüdü” (1982), “Cocuksun Sen” (1994), and “Barbar ile Behla” (2003).

Vecdi Sayar is a Turkish critic and cultural manager. He is president of three artistic and cultural organisations: the “Turkish P.E.N. Center”, the “Association for Intercultural Communication”, and the “Independent Arts Council.” Additionally, he is advisor for arts to the Mayor of Istanbul and columnist writer for “Cumhuriyet”. Sayar is also a stage designer and worked as artistic director for numerous art festivals such as the “Pera Fest” multidisciplinary arts festival, which focused on the theme of multiculturalism, the “Can Festival” (poetry festival), “Encounter of European and Anatolian Cultures,” an arts festival that took place in different cities of Anatolia such as Kayseri, Malatya, Kahramanmara and Gaziantep, the “International Festival of Youth Films” (Cannes Junior Istanbul), “Art Bridges to the East” (Van & Hakkari), and the “International Festival of Prince Islands”. Sayar is member of the Executive Board of “Istanbul 2010 Capital of Culture” and he worked as Director of Turkish Cinematheque, as Technical Director of Istanbul Municipal Theatres, and as counsellor of the Ministry of Culture and the Turkish Embassy in Paris. He was instructor at Istanbul Bilgi University and Yıldız Technical University (Departments of Arts Management and Film & TV), programme consultant of “Cinema at Bilgi,” Programme Director of “Istanbul International Film Festival” (IKSV), founder and member of the board of “Turkish Foundation for Cinema and Audiovisual” (TURSAK), and founder and director of “TURKFILM”.

Ahmet Ögüt was born in Diyarbakir in Turkey in 1981. He graduated from the Fine Arts Faculty at Hacettepe University, and currently lives in Istanbul. Ögüt works as a research assistant at the Yıldız Teknik University and also is editor of “muhtelif,” a contemporary art publication. He was invited to the Residency Program for artists at the Riksbank Academy for Fine Arts, Amsterdam and has presented his work at several exhibitions worldwide, including the 9th International Istanbul Biennial, the Villa Manin Center for Contemporary Art in Udine, the Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic in Zagreb, the European Patent Office in Munich, the Luxe Gallery in New York, the Platform Garanti (Contemporary Art Center in Istanbul), as well as the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Malmö, the KUMU Tallinn Museum of Modern Art, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham (UK), and the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana.

Cairo

Phantoms and People, Specters and Spirits

*Faris, November
2005*

¹ Riding in a taxi from the airport into Cairo, the first thing I saw was a giant billboard advertising the release of new movies, and I noticed that the latest screening times began at three o'clock in the morning. I thought that this must have been aimed at reaching an audience of young night owls, and was shocked to find myself at one of those very screenings a few days later at three o'clock in the morning, surrounded by whole families: men, women and children. I already knew about the popularity of cinema among Egyptians, a cultural characteristic that distinguishes them from all the other people in the region; nevertheless, seeing the crowds at the three o'clock show had a certain impact on me. As we had been checking in our luggage at our downtown hotel, we noticed that the lobby had been decorated with pictures of movie stars who had filmed scenes at this prestigious hotel. The pictures were hung there to attract customers, but their presence was also an implicit homage to the cinema.

It is then natural that the strong relationship held between the public and the cinema would lead, with time, to a kind of unofficial censorship, reflecting the dominant cultural norms of the times. Today, these norms and values are mostly Islamic ones, as Hani Khalifa (one of the most prominent directors of the 1990s) pointed out – a by-product of the growing religious trend that sometimes verges on extremism in Egyptian society. I do not want to delve into the causes behind this phenomenon here; there are many complex historical, social, cultural, and educational factors involved. I did notice, however, that it was rare to see an unveiled woman on the streets of Cairo, unlike



what I had seen in Damascus and Amman. Because mosques cannot accommodate the great number of worshippers, many are forced to pray out on the streets. In the cafés, I was told about the increasing influence of religious extremists, and the growing pressure exerted by them in some Egyptian cities to restrict personal freedoms allowed by the state.

Perhaps the rapid and alarming growth of the religious wave reflects a regional trend, and is not exclusive to Egypt. The strictly Egyptian variety of this phenomenon, however, is related to the rise of a generation of “religious” artists and writers who have focused on producing “religiously acceptable” work, and a great number of “liberal” artists who have converted to religious conservatism, refusing any longer to produce non-orthodox work. This observation seems to be supported by the increasing numbers of young female actresses wearing veils, whereas, in the past, veils had only been common among actresses over forty years old.

One might be able to detect a pragmatic and positive side to this situation, however. It allows for the creation of a long-term dialogue between art and religion through institutions (in the past, it had been an internal conflict carried out in isolation from the second party in mosques and on podiums) that could produce a tolerant approach to religion resembling the one existing in the Arab world at the beginning of the twentieth century, the distinction being the social groups or segments exercising this tolerance. Acceptance of this theory would naturally lead to less anxiety about the “Islamization” of certain artistic and literary productions, which, at the moment, are defined by the religious as “works which cannot yet be banned, though, according to Islam, they are unlawful.” What is meant here by the term “Islamization” is the entrance of Islamists into the field of cultural production, or at least the establishment of a connection to that field through exploiting shared interests and friendships, which allows them to interfere with what they might consider to be taboo or blasphemous themes, taking control of and banning work. This has already happened with the appearance of “clean” films (that do not contain any kissing) over the past decade, as well as songs that deal with Islamic values and that have “socially halal (religiously acceptable)” messages, such as maternal love, friendship, or the everyday love of work. In the past, Islamic support of music was limited to songs about religious topics. What is unclear today is the real extent to which this “Islamization” has occurred. An art student who I talked with at the Fishawi café told me that Islamists are now beginning to reach young people by offering them chances to be involved artistically in music and cinema, which, in her opinion, meant: “If young people were to enter this field, they would have to

abide by the Islamists’ norms and values.” I do not know how accurate this woman’s diagnosis was, but even the simplest cultural consumer can see the impact the greater public has on cinema and music, leading toward unofficial censorship – censorship by the people. Today, this censorship is more or less a religious one.

One week after our arrival in Cairo, a small café in a narrow alley brought us together with Georges Bahgory. The face of Bahgory with its multicolored smile is a mirror that reflects simultaneously the simplicity and great depth of the Egyptians. One can find many expressions in it that are difficult to specify, such as pain caused by the present mixed with a continuous will for life, or attachment to the microcosms of neighborhoods mixed with a desire for national change. It was not unusual then to see this Egyptian simplicity and complexity in the face and words of Hani Khalifa, the young Egyptian director. It struck me that the two men – whom I met with separately – seemed to cross pass at the intersection of two Egyptian eras, the one that has passed, and the one to come. On the one hand, there is Bahgory’s sarcasm and his longing for the past, and on the other, Khalifa’s despair about prospects for the future.

“I DISCOVERED THE BEAUTY OF LAUGHTER AS AN ART FORM AND WAY OF LIFE”

A statement by the Egyptian Painter Georges Bahgory

[...]

I feel that the best moments of my life have taken place after I turned seventy. Before that, I used to experiment for the most part. I still do that to a certain extent, but I never thought that the experimentation would go on for so long. After I turned seventy, my simple drawing moved toward the concept of a single line, which was something I learned from Picasso’s drawings. He would start from a single point, and curve around the paper or canvas until reaching another point. There is a point of departure at the beginning, and a point of arrival at the end. The point of departure might be at any point in the painting, but the drawing is continuously flowing and moving, like the blood-flow or digestive system, or any other pattern or flow in our lives. My drawing is made up of a single line: one representing a tragic or existential journey, in which I explain all my feelings and present them in a structured visual form. This journey represents an analysis of my creativity at that specific moment. The last point in the journey is the signature in the piece. The lines flow, and the colors flow with them. It becomes a journey through life, which might possibly even reach

immortality. That is the logic that I follow in the art of drawing, and it has developed with a lot of time, and many long years of experience.

[...]

My childhood was miserable. I lost my mother, and was deprived of many things. My sadness passed, however, the moment I discovered the pleasure I had in painting. The art of painting is what brought joy to me. At the age of fifteen, I once started to laugh while I was painting. That experience defined my character for the rest of my life: to laugh and to let my art bring laughter. That was the beginning, and it led me to become a caricaturist for many long years.

[...]

When I reached the age of twenty, I went to the Faculty of Fine Arts to study painting. Though, academically, I have learned all the rules and concepts of that art form, I have never liked the idea of separating art from the rest of life. Students of painting might spend eight hours drawing a model. The model sits there, and students draw and are worried about the teacher walking in at any minute and grading their work. I have never liked this relationship. I did not study painting in order to get a job or a degree. I studied it because I love it. Anything that attracts the eye is worthy of being drawn. During my times as a student, I would go to a café everyday to drink tea. The café was usually full of people, and the atmosphere was always amazing, with the waiter walking to and fro with his tray. This inspired me to continue drawing outside of the classrooms, and in the cafés, on



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the streets, and everywhere else. I would also sit at home, drawing my father and my brothers as they ate, prayed, read, or had coffee or tea. I have many sketches of my father, may he rest in peace, which I made of him reading the newspaper and drinking his coffee.

[...]

In the early 1950s, my work began to be printed in all of the newspapers, and my drawings gained wide-scale acclaim. My friend Abou al-Ainen introduced me to the magazine he was working for, and, as circumstances had it, I went on to illustrate the cover of the magazine, along with two pages and various comics within it. My weekly job became very time-consuming, leaving little time for my studies at the department of fine arts. By that time, the country had already developed a marvelous cultural atmosphere, and culture prospered in Egypt throughout the 1950s. Those were the years that gave us Naguib Mahfouz, for example, as well as some of the country's greatest thinkers and writers, like Ahmad Baha' al-Deen, Loutfi el-Khouly, Mohammad Aouda, Yousif Idrees, Abdel-Rahman al-Sharkawi, Mohammad Hasanein Haikal, and Yehia Hai, along with many others in cinema and music. Through my work as an artist, I gained the chance to meet them all.

I used to listen and watch but never speak. I was the youngest, and was not allowed to object to anything or interrupt any of them while they were speaking. I simply used to pick out a small corner, and draw caricatures of them, even though I retained the highest amount of respect for them. My drawings would rotate among them, and provide



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some relief from the serious atmosphere among them, transforming it into a more playful and comical one. It also served to draw attention to myself. Our meetings increased, and these people slowly became my family. I became one of them, although I was the youngest by both age and stature. Because I was still humble and not self-confident enough, I was satisfied with being like their little brother, and they used to take care of me. I had discovered the beauty of laughter as an art form and way of life by myself, but this was further intensified when I met the painters Salah Jayin and Bahjat Osman. They were the kings of laughter, not just in painting, but also in life. I moved away from shyness and humility, and I finally joined that group of elites. Bit by bit, due to the nurturing atmosphere among them, my cultural knowledge increased. In the 1950s, our cultural meetings were natural and beautiful. Experiencing this atmosphere moved me to improve and evolve day by day, especially since all the people I met would congratulate me on my drawings.

[...]

I had become a popular figure in the media, but I noticed that I had lost part of my artistic creativity due to the repetitive nature of my job. So I decided to give up the job and travel to France, stopping in Italy on my way. I wanted to visit museums and see original works of art instead of simply looking at them in books or learning about them through the media. In doing this at that time, I started a new life. My first birth was in northern Egypt in the city of Luxor in 1932, and my second birth was in Paris in 1970!

It was Paris that finally transformed me into a true artist. Paris gives the artist a feeling of completeness. I would walk along the Seine and find books about paintings, posters, postcards, music on records, and films. All kinds of artistic mediums are present and accessible in the heart of Paris. The gate of the river Seine is proof of this. Everything the eye sees in Paris is beautiful. From the tree, to the bridge, to the river, to the house, to the statue, to the square, to the street, to the neighborhood, to the museum: all of these are magical in Paris. Even the metro tunnels, which are supposed to be dark, underground tunnels, are illuminated with large works of art, which are sometimes advertisements for shirts, dresses, shampoo and other accessories, and other times promotion for museums, galleries, and tourism. My cultural knowledge was shaped again by a new language, a new field of study, new observations, and most of all, travel. I became more experienced, and was leading a beautiful, artistic and cultural life.

[...]

Even if, during my stay in Paris, I was influenced by the works of impressionists, cubists and all the others, I always end up returning to my Egyptian heritage. The concepts of authenticity and identity imply that all my works should include a reflection of Egypt in them. For example, my ancestors worshipped Ra, the god of the sun. The sun is present in every wall mural made by the Pharaohs. It is also visible behind each statue, and forms a silhouette, creating a special contour which delineates the shape and form of the figure. These inherited elements will never change. The sun that rises today is the same one that my ancestors, the Pharaohs, saw rising 5000 years ago. I therefore remain committed to these elements as part of my Egyptian identity. The search for identity is always on my mind. However, it can not be intentional. It should come simply and naturally, just like language, a bite, a word, a kiss, or even a joke. Egyptian jokes are simple and unique. Our accent and the ways in which we interact also mark the Egyptian identity. The same goes for art.

[...]

The new and beautiful works of art found in Egypt along with the other new discoveries made in the region of Fayyoun dating back to Roman times, particularly the portraits, impressed me greatly. Portraits were made of the deceased either on their deathbeds or before their funerals, and the famous painters of that era drew their subjects with striking realism. However, there is the sense of an emotion similar to martyrdom or immortality in these paintings. Because it was believed that death was not something sad, but was instead the beginning of another life which might well be happier, the faces of the dead were portrayed with smiles on them. The Fayyoun portraits were drawn either on the sarcophaguses or on the masks which covered the heads of the deceased. The carpenter would create a curved mask and the face was drawn along that curve. This added to the spirituality of the work. It looks as if the person was rising into the sky at the moment of death.

[...]

I once took a Nile cruise from Luxor to Aswan. I had a blank notebook which I filled up during that trip. It was a beautiful experience. I positioned myself in a location at the front of the boat, surrounded by glass, and felt as if I were moving on the water by myself, along with the boat. Because the boat was moving so fast at times, the scene would change rapidly. I would lose the palm tree I might be drawing, but would quickly find another one. After a boat would pass by, I would look for another one to continue drawing. It was a continuous struggle in an attempt at recording movement.

- 2 Every time I would look at the face of the elevator boy with the southern Egyptian dialect, or speak with the owner of the traditional restaurant in front of the hotel, or with the policeman, or the night shift waiter in the café, examining the religious signs on their faces and the faces of many others, my thoughts would go back to the phenomena of collective retreat to religion, which is not a product of pure belief as much as it is the result of distrusting any other solution. I cannot but relate this dominant religious trend to a large-scale political, cultural, and social depression, which is caused by poverty and marginalization. Of course, this depression is not exclusively an Egyptian one, but again, rather a regional characteristic. Nevertheless, Egypt is a special case in that it has engendered the intention not only of improving the lives of its own people, but also of playing a leading role in effecting transformation and change throughout the entire region. Here, of course, I am referring to the past fifty years, following the arrival of Jamal Abdul Nasser, who preached that a secular political system backed by nationalist ideology was the only system that could bring happiness to Egypt locally, and to the Arab world regionally, keeping any perceived enemies in check with an iron fist, primarily any voices of alternative rule such as Islamist and Communist ones. It was inevitable that the failure of Abdul Nasser's strategies would lead to a regional catastrophe. That failure led to the eradication of the model of secular nationalism – given the improvisational character and naivety of the two concepts – a development coupled with the humiliations suffered by the Arab world politically and culturally, especially in terms of civilization. It was inevitable that such defeats would lead to the retreat of the people and to them adopting options that had been ignored by political leaders and most segments of society in the



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first few years of their dreams, the years that – according to modern Arab history – followed the second World War. Those were the years of nationalist fervor, and in which independence movements spread throughout the Arab world. Thus, this retreat – in its most widespread and violent form – had to be choosing the return to political Islam.

What really astonished me about the Egyptians – without delving into issues of political religion – is that their religiousness entailed peaceful cohabitation with poverty and marginalization, combined with humor and intimacy, and that life and interaction mostly take place in the café. It is a faith that brings them closer to “Allah,” present in the bitterness of existence and the scarcity of bread. Though my stay in Cairo was short, and it is possible that my conclusions are wrong, I clearly saw signs of this cohabitation when taking an early morning walk through the city streets. They began with the smiles which seemed to be pinned onto people’s faces who were sitting in small restaurants, and did not end with the surprising warmth with which they seemed to accept their own fate, or the expressions of contentment with their lives and selves that could be heard everywhere. At the same time, however – once again, aside from any discussion on religious politics – I could read in people’s eyes, their foreheads imprinted with religious bliss, an intense desire for religious salvation from the general depression, which is clearly, above all else, a “civilizational depression.” This desire is not confined to the thirst for political change, but also represents a general submission to divine intervention, like in Pharaonic times, propelled by a deep and painful disillusionment with this world. This deep societal desire for religion is similar to that which spread through Iraq during the 1990s for much the same reason: despondency caused by the failure of secular nationalism coupled with a despair about not being able to create change. This is a religious faith that prefers to escape politics, rather



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than to enter them. It is a faith built on a mistrust of what politics will bring tomorrow, and a faith that does not wish to change “anything,” as much as it desires to change “everything.”

The religious trend in the 1990s in Iraq found many Iraqi artists and writers who had previously been rebellious to different degrees turning toward religion. It is strange to see this cycle now underway in contemporary Egypt, as artists and writers turn toward religion. There is no need to point out the parallel between Abdul Nasser’s nationalist discourse (that remained after his death in 1970) and Saddam Hussein’s, noting also that both of these twin idols’ “nationalism” reached the peak of destruction at the same moment, following the invasion and liberation of Kuwait in 1991, a liberation in which inter alia the Egyptian army had participated.

- 3 Throughout my short stay, as I wandered from the Feshawi café to the Groppi café, passed by the famous bookshops there, and walked across Tahrir and Tal’at Harb squares, along the banks of the Nile, through the Cairene nights, I found myself looking at young people’s faces, thinking of the words of the Egyptian artists I had met. I could not shake the illogical, yet clear and present feeling that a deep change was taking place in the country’s culture. Perhaps this is not going to be a change towards total religious transformation, as much as an opening up to a new cultural era that might last as long as a generation, filled with changes in values regarding literature, art and culture. These changes might partly be manifested in a retreat to the classical spirit. Some of them will probably mean finding a compromise between opposing forces. But the biggest loser will be the most difficult option, that of modernism.

*Abdulmohsin,
November 2005*

- 1 I liked Cairo very much. I liked its people, its squares, its popular restaurants and its cafes. I liked its streets and its monuments. I loved its indefatigable movement, and its lively, breathing nights. I remember buying two novels by the Moroccan author Mohammad Shukri (Al-Khubz al-Hafi and Al-Shattar) at 3 a.m. from a man selling books on the pavement outside the Al-Ahram newspaper offices that I had just left after visiting the journalist and author Saad al-Qursh, who had sent me off with his beautiful autographed books. We had met him once before and discussed the relationship between literature and place at the Fishawi café underneath the picture of the great Naguib Mahfouz, commemorating him as a former regular of that particular coffeehouse. Cairo’s people are good-hearted. They are! I felt this, and I have more than one story to prove it.

The people of Cairo, Copts and Muslims alike, have surrendered to their fates completely, and this is of course a deeply-rooted issue with clear historical dimensions. They are committed to their rituals, and the wearing of the veil among young and old Muslim women is a phenomenon that is evident at a passing glance. The veil here does not mean just hiding one’s hair, but has gone beyond that to a black mask, and gloves of the same color, which hide the palms. Long beards, visibly marked foreheads, but also short clothes are a visible phenomenon among men on Cairo’s streets. You see all this and become familiar with it. It comes mixed with humor, and jokes, and uninterrupted pranks, and it is rare to find someone with a bad disposition. But their tastes and sense of humor are mixed with a deep sadness, and old suffering. The people of Cairo are generous and hospitable. They invite you to come in immediately after greeting you. They make their livings in any legal way possible, so it is standard to find yourself, while seated in a public space, dragged into a long, drawn-out bargaining session with an elegant young man who offers his wares stamped with his own conversational trademark. I bought things from such sellers many times, impressed by their linguistic abilities.

Most of Cairo’s young men are fervent supporters of their football teams, and are prepared to defend - and not only with their words - their teams from any hint of irony. They are either Al-Ahli or Al-Zamalik football club supporters, and have many slogans to show their support, such as “Al-Ahli defeats champions” and “A Zamalik player is invincible.”

“THERE IS AN INTEREST IN MAINTAINING THE CHASM BETWEEN THE ART WORLD AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC”

An interview with the Egyptian Artist Amal Kenawy

Faris: What kind of reaction do you think has been given to video art by the general public - as opposed to more specialized audiences?

Amal: I have to admit that most of those who have come to my exhibitions happen to be friends of mine, but I cannot say that this reflects badly upon ordinary people, or any non-specialized kind of audience, since I usually do not present my work to such an audience. I was fortunate and very pleased, however, about my first experience with a large audience. That was at a festival in al-Minya, in Egypt’s southern region, a place where you would least expect any non-traditional work such as mine to be shown. The festival included folkloric dances and songs, and people had obviously not come to see my work but to see the singers who preceded and followed my show. When I saw that there were about forty young children in the audience, I was sure that I was

doomed to fail. I never thought they would be interested in watching my twenty minute-long film. As soon as the film started, however, everyone's attention was immediately captivated, and they watched in total silence. I acknowledged this as a sign of their approval, despite the presentiments of many at the festival that the video would fail because of its depiction of things such as live cardiac surgery. This showed me that limitations, in terms of what audiences will or will not accept, are placed more by the organizers of festivals and shows than they are by the actual audiences. This denies a vast number of people their abilities to form their own opinions and make their own judgments about works of art.

Faris: *But, did not you yourself share this feeling with the festival organizers – that the audience would not enjoy the film, and that it was doomed to fail?*

Amal: No, not really. There were many children there though, and I was certain that they would not be used to seeing films like the one which I was showing. I thought that it might be uninteresting for them. What actually worried me at the time was that the audience might not be able to understand the intended message of my film. I was not worried about this because I believed that they were ignorant, but because I knew that they had very limited access to contemporary cultural work. This applies to audiences in general, including members of my own family. They also tend to give off the impression that they would not be able to understand contemporary art, simply because they have had so little access to it. Some of my family members always ask me about my work, even though they doubt their own abilities to understand or empathize with it. In our culture, there are many preconceptions and assumptions about art in general, which is why artists often hear things like: "We don't know anything about what you do! We don't understand plastic art," or "We don't understand contemporary poetry." They themselves are under the completely false impression that this kind of art is beyond their comprehension.

Abdalmohsin: *Do you believe that your family's reaction to your work, and their doubts, could possibly be due to the complex, referential nature of video art?*

Amal: No, I do not. This rejection precedes any experience which they might have had with my art, and is partly caused by their questioning the more materialistic or practical value of the work that I do before they have even seen it, simply because they assume that art is not profitable. This is primarily a social issue. When I decided to study art, my family objected because they were worried about my career prospects after graduating.

Abdalmohsin: *That is my question...Your family and friends' concerns have to do with the nature of this kind of work. They think of art as poetry, sculpture, paintings, or drama, and the like. So they are suspicious of an art form that has no fixed identity but is instead a mixture of all these other art forms; in this case, video art. How do you face such challenges?*

Amal: It is difficult to explain my position exactly, but I can say that my work has already had a direct influence on my audiences, whether in Egypt or abroad. This has given me the feeling that I should continue working freely, without any kind of self-censorship to my work which might be due to any assumptions I might make about my audience. In fact, I believe that most people share my thoughts and feelings completely about the things I create. Furthermore, because my work and video art in general is non-commercial by nature, I feel that I am free to create and produce. I am not tied to any outside structure that could make demands on me, and this gives my work an edge.

Abdalmohsin: *Are the problems of Egyptian society present in your work? How do you understand these problems? Do you feel connected to them, or do you feel that you are above them?*

Amal: I am not concerned with presenting an image of the Egyptian citizen in my work or providing viewers with any direct picture of the Egyptians in my projects. In fact, I do all I can to avoid presenting that part of my identity (that of being an Egyptian, Arab, or member of a Muslim society), because this could turn my work into a global commodity. That is what is happening with a lot of art, and I absolutely reject this concept, along with the tendency to present the artist as a marketable figure alongside their work. On the other hand, I do not reject my identity. It is certainly a real and important part of me, but it is simply not a part of my subject matter. I do not care about topics that are related to the clichés and banal assumptions that foreigners make about Arab or Muslim art. In general, my work is humanist in nature, and concerned with what people have in common, such as socio-economic or political circumstances, irrespective of their nationalities or cultures. I present human beings as products of their respective societies, and as beings who react to those societies. It is precisely in that way that I am connected to the Egyptian citizen.

Faris: *Amal...I would like to ask about the main problems facing the development and dissemination of video art in Egypt now, based, of course, on your own personal experience.*

Amal: With respect to art in general, I have to say that there is still a great divide between the general audience and the more specialized one. Unfortunately, this is a problem that pervades much of modern or

contemporary art, and it is not because of any fault on the part of the viewer or receiver, especially because they often do not even have the opportunity to see the work so that they can accept, contemplate, or reject it. Because of this, we do not have a contemporary art movement in Egypt at all. We are simply unable to attract a large enough audience. Despite all of this, there are attempts being made to change the situation and to seek better financial support for contemporary artwork. In Egypt now, a number of independent institutions have started to work in cooperation with the government, and have begun to establish a strong presence in the country's cultural life, following a long history of government rejection of this kind of cooperation. However, if this large discrepancy between the two audiences persists, it could remain the biggest problem facing us today. Something must certainly be done to amend the situation. I have started to ask myself why artists do not try more to reach the public using large public spaces as a first step for instance? I believe that this is either the result of simple neglect, or that there is even a more insidious, and deliberate reason for the continued existence of such an enormous gap between the art world and the general public.

Faris: A more insidious, and deliberate reason?

Amal: It is either someone's goal or due to pure neglect that the situation should remain like this; or it is simply because we have been brought up to think of there being certain types or levels of audiences, some of whom were never meant to be exposed to, let alone experience or enjoy, contemporary art... as though we artists were meant to be operating on a higher plane of depth and culture, incomprehensible to ordinary people.



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*Diaries continue,
Abdalmohsin*

2 Time: The day before we left Cairo

Location: Nibrawi street 10, where it branches off from Champollion street in Downtown Cairo.

I was walking out of the Townhouse gallery after the conversation we had with the artist Amal Kenawy about her astonishing video-art work. As I was walking, a poster for one of the electoral candidates to parliament caught my attention. In the middle of the poster was a small, oval-shaped picture of a bearded man. Over his head, in the shape of a rainbow, was written "Islam is the Solution." This slogan was often featured in the discussions my friend Faris and I had with people throughout our stay in Cairo, particularly since our visit coincided with the elections, and campaign posters and banners, as well as candidates' pictures, filled the streets and covered the walls. I do not remember the logo used in that candidate's campaign exactly, but I do remember vividly that it was a weapon of some kind... what a coincidence! I turned away from the poster with a number of thoughts and questions about the mobilization of religion as a tool for achieving political ends still occupying my mind. I entered the café and saw Georges Bahgory there among the guests. Believe me when I tell you that this artist has a commanding presence. I stood for a while staring in astonishment at that person coming from a Pharaonic womb, a civilization that has endured six thousand years. Despite the presence of his white beard, he had not lost his child-like features. His body was more short than tall, and his hair covered his ears and the back of his neck. His clothes were simple but elegant, just like his smile and riveting wit. I sat beside him after having been introduced to him by my brilliant friend Oday Rasheed, who had spoken of him with as much passion as respect. My conversation with Bahgory took us to Iraq, to the change of power, and to his great desire to see the occupation forces leave, and to see a free and democratic Iraq emerge; to the Iraqi theater director Jawad Salim, and to Baghdad and the modernity of Iraqi expressionist art. He told me a story about Ismail Fattah al-Turk, the Iraqi artist who created the martyr statue in Baghdad, and I told him about my hometown Najaf. During our conversation, he pulled a piece of paper and a black pen from out of his pocket and began to draw a sketch of me. When he was done, he signed the sketch with a phrase infused with one of his idiosyncrasies; he wrote, "to my friend Abdalmohsin / Georges Bahgory 15-11-20005," as if he intended that our meeting last up until that date and then remain.

3 As I see it, a new cultural phase began in Egypt with the military's seizure of power in July 1952. I also think that if we compared this period, with open minds, objectivity, and balanced judgment, to the cultural period preceding it, we would find a retreat in most areas - I am referring to cultural areas only. This is certainly not a generalization lacking proof, but is the result of a serious examination spanning over a decade, supported by what I then heard during the interviews and meetings we held in Cairo. How could one otherwise explain, for example, the inability of contemporary intellectuals to ask a number of questions, and the "taboos" surrounding these, that were posed and debated, not only in intellectual circles or among the elite but in newspapers and within the disciplines of various art forms, over a century ago? How did accusations of heresy become dominate over thinking, as the intellectual Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid wonders? What made a thinker like Al-Sayyed al-Qumni publicly apologize for what he had written, and extricate himself from his writing, and then stop writing completely? What would force an established writer like Naguib Mahfouz to ask Al-Azhar to issue a fatwa allowing debate over his novel *Awlad Haritna*, before it was published and distributed among the public? Free cultural-epistemological-artistic work that is always changing became entwined in the religious-dogmatic-moralizing that is controlled, literal and monolithic. How did this intervention happen, and who allowed it? When will there be a separation between what is political and what is epistemological? Tens upon tens of questions; too many to list...

It was a Stalinist model cooked in Arabic flavors. A totalitarian regime with false pretensions of social equality, a mortal catastrophe. It is characterized by the blurred vision of a dead-end applying a one-legged brand of socialism. A development that restricted itself to building cement and forgot about human beings. Free education produced hundreds of thousands of educated unemployed, graduating hordes of people with restricted goals and no sense of hope. The individual was sacrificed for the sake of vast "nationalist" projects and the crowd. A "revolutionary" leadership has now replaced all the policies of the previous "revolutionary" leadership. There are daily calls from the echelons of power for democracy and reform, but the leadership is completely ignorant of the historical necessity of disrupting the traditional structure of the society they are ruling. They castrate "the Other," who is different (different in terms of religion for the most part), etc ... But this is not the end. I do not deny, and neither does anyone else, that in Egypt there is more than one margin of freedom. But, is there room in these margins for change?

"ARTISTS SEEM MORE AND MORE INSPIRED TO DELVE INTO THE SPHERE OF POLITICS"

Statement of William Wells, Owner of the Townhouse Gallery (Cairo)

When my partner Yaser Jerab and I (William Wells) decided to look for a space to house the vision we shared for our art space, we were stubbornly led to upscale neighborhoods of Cairo. Furthermore, prevailing wisdom chimed that only main thoroughfares would attract existing audiences. We wanted high ceilings to host large-scale pieces, not the humble and cramped spaces that well-to-do sectors offered; we wanted an entire building to fit our ambitions. Thus did we end up on Nebrawi Street, a service lane in downtown Cairo (Wust el-Balad), a serpentine intersection of Champollion Street, where mechanics, glass makers, carpenters, welders, and countless sidewalk coffee-shops are lodged. There, almost effortlessly, we found the empty building that would become our space. Perhaps more importantly, we found our community. We struck anchor.

The Townhouse Gallery was inaugurated in December 1998. At first, the art community of Cairo was very suspicious of our space. They could not imagine how we could build an audience. Very few artists, if any at all, expressed interest in exhibiting, no matter how much we tried to convince them to take the risk. Obviously, we were being put to the test.

Our second exhibition involved drawings from street children in our neighborhood, and our first opening of two foreign artists living in Cairo was very well attended; we surmised that people were compelled by curiosity. We hung only a few drawings on each wall, instead of forty, breaking with the local convention of salon display. The space seemed to



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win over hearts, and within two months, I no longer labored at looking for artists, rather at finding time to look at the portfolios piling up on my desk. Within six months, we renovated the third floor to fit our expanding scope of activities, and by the end of the first year, we administered six residency studios and two exhibition spaces in that building.

[...]

We were not only approached by visual artists, also a number of musical groups and theater troupes, all lacking rehearsal and performance space, knocked on our door. The space at Townhouse was so unencumbered that it could host a performance on one night, a musical concert the next, and a visual arts exhibition for a month running. The range of artistic expression varied to include a diversity of media, turning the space into a melting pot and meeting point for multidisciplinary activity. Artists began to collaborate, mixing media and expertise... Gradually, we too turned to other galleries in the neighborhood, our conversations aimed at weaving a collaborative network for the production of art, and they resulted in the Nitaq Festival. It, too, was a remarkable success.

[...]

At heart, the Townhouse Gallery's mission was and remains far removed from established art galleries in the city. That became clear to artists from the beginning: they found an institutional realm that supported the production of work provocative in form and content, that proposed an alternative paradigm to artistic practice, far removed from prevailing values and principles guiding the manufacture and trade of art. Artists produced a representation of contemporary Egypt, their everyday life, social and political issues, and themselves that countered, subverted, interrogated or ran asunder official or dominant representations. The pertinence, courage and novelty in the works contributed to widening the gallery's audience. It stretched across social classes, age groups and proclivities.

By the end of our second year, we inaugurated an annex space across the street (The Annex), a cubical space ideal for showcasing photography and video. By the third year, we rented a shut down factory next door to The Annex, a hangar-like space that could fit large-scale work and installations (The Factory). With additional funds, the walls were soundproofed and the former factory was outfitted with a lighting system and a stage, all swift and lightweight so they could be done and undone in the space of 24 hours. The space has a seating capacity of up to 500 people. With the Annex and the Factory - the latter turning into a focal point - we were finally able to move our scope of activities into the street.

Taking performance to the street is key because artistic and cultural activity in public spaces is, at best, regarded with extreme prejudice, and at worst, prohibited. Young - daredevil - actors and directors have formed street-theater troupes that do not balk at presenting their performances in the middle of street life and its bustle, often stopping traffic for half-hour long performances with people actually shutting down car engines and watching.

As our various spaces and street activities are lodged in back lanes, the Egyptian authorities have not really bothered with the concert of "disruptions" we cause, confronting and confusing people on the main roads.

[...]

The goodwill of various property owners in our neighborhood has granted us access to spaces such as the Viennoise Hotel, closed since the 1970s, as well as vacant apartments. Owners and workers of small business operations (mechanics, coffee shops, and craft ateliers) have also embraced us with diligence and generosity.

A number of independent spaces have emerged since our first opening, including Emad el-Din Studios (on Emad el-Din Street, also in the downtown area), Makan (on Mansour Street in the Munira neighborhood), and, a few alleys removed, the Contemporary Image Collective. In spite of this noteworthy trend, commercial galleries still refrain from investing in young artists, the same establishments that dominated the market seven years ago and still do today. They have fastened further the dominion held by elder and established artists over sensibilities and the market.

Key to understanding why the Townhouse has captivated the interest of the younger generation of artists and earned their trust is our total independence from government and public structures and from the establishment of the elder generation and their control. If the generational gap is tangible, it is the younger generation that seems motivated in bridging it. We are often impelled upon their instigation to invite the older generation of artists to participate in panel discussions and conversations. Undoubtedly, fostering dialogue can only be enriching and of benefit to the overall art scene.

[...]

Photography is definitely one of the fields in the visual arts that had received the least attention from gallerists in Cairo. When we inaugurated the Townhouse in 1998, there were virtually no spaces

exhibiting photographs. Thus, we initiated PhotoCairo to draw attention to the art, and to nurture a generation of emerging photographers. Eight years later, photography has finally become “normalized” as an art. Almost every gallery in the city has showcased photographs, and sales of photographs exceed sales of paintings. Photography has severely impacted representations of contemporary Egypt. Artists carrying cameras (still or video) in the street find increasing difficulty, but this is due to the changes in the overall political climate in the country. Cameras rouse so much suspicion that photographers wonder if they can actually produce at all. The reaction of some has been to turn towards studio and indoor photography, a reaction not unrelated to the process of internalizing censorship.

The political imperatives shrouding the region and the country have left another imprint on this art scene. Artists seem more and more inspired to delve in the sphere of politics, or to engage the “political” in their work. The thunderous debates on democracy and democratic practices (particularly during the recent rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections here) have not left artists unmoved or detached. Albeit discreetly, a significant portion of the works produced recently have engaged political themes or social issues with political resonance. Much of their potency lies in the power of interpretation, and, for that reason we have been able to showcase them without encountering objection or coercion from the authorities.

[...]

Last but not least, the problem that practically overshadows all others is the availability of funds and monies to enable the production of art works. On the one hand, new media, such as video, installation and large-scale photographic prints incur production costs that artists and galleries never had to consider a decade ago. On the other hand, audiences have grown more exigent in their expectation of quality of finish and presentation. Whenever we have taken any project to task, the overwhelming question that recurs amongst our staff has invariably revolved around raising funds. At the present moment of drafting this text, we claim three (almost) full-time employees dedicated solely to applying for grants, looking for donors, and forging collaborations with institutions to secure artistic production. Artists are profoundly implicated in the process, and for that they have had to step out of their studios, and editing rooms and collaborate with our staff on drafting proposals and grants. It is a new practice for artists, as it is for galleries in Egypt, including our own, but we seem to be sailing through the rough and making good process.

BIOGRAPHIES

Georges Bahgory (1932) is an Egyptian painter and caricaturist. He obtained his doctorate on Picasso and Pharaonic art from Sorbonne University. Bahgory has held around thirty exhibitions in Paris, Limoges, and other European and Arab cities. His oil paintings and other pieces decorate the walls at the Museum of Limoges, the National Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in Amman, Jordan, and the Khaldoun al-Dawoud Museum in Fuheis, Jordan. A museum in Alexandria, Egypt, exhibiting among others his work, was named after him. Bahgory has participated in several international caricature festivals, winning the first prize at the Portrait Festival in Spain in 1991 for his portrayal of Franco, and has won other awards at festivals in France and Yugoslavia. In 2006, he was awarded the prize of the most significant Arab artist by King Abdullah of Jordan, and the Egyptian prize for creative excellence. Bahgory has written three novels, *Aykuunat al-Tufuulah* (The Childhood Icon), *Aykuunat al-Fan* (The Art Icon) in which he depicts his youth, and *Aykuunat Baariis* (The Paris Icon), which revolves around his emigration to Paris.

Amal Kenawy (Cairo 1974) is an Egyptian video artist and has a BA in painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo. She has held numerous solo and group exhibitions in Egypt and other countries worldwide. Among her most recent solo exhibitions were the one held at Darat al-Funun in Amman in 2007. In Cairo that same year, she showed her video “You will be killed” at the Space Art Gallery. Among her other solo exhibitions in Cairo were “Booby Trapped Heaven” (video installation 2006) at the Masharabia Gallery, The “Artificial Purple Forest” (video animation 2005) at Al-Falaky Gallery-AUC, and “The Journey” (video installation 2004) at the Townhouse Gallery. Internationally, she has presented her work at the 1st Biennale of the Canaries for Architecture, Art, and Landscape in 2006, the 1st Singapore Biennale 2006, and the Dakar Biennale in Senegal the same year, among other places.

Kenawy has joined several group exhibitions, including her participation from 2004 to 2007 in the African Remix exhibition held in different places (Germany, France, Sweden, UK, Japan, and South Africa). She also took part in the Nafas exhibition at the IFA Gallery in Berlin, Germany 2006, Some Stories at the Kunst Halle in Vienna, Austria in 2005, the Home Works Art Forum in Beirut, Lebanon in 2005, in addition to the Never the Right Time group exhibition at the Media festival in Toronto, Canada, and The Sphinx will Devour You at the Kansi Sanat Gallery in Istanbul, Turkey in 2004. International theater and film festivals have shown her art projects, including the Kunsten Festival des Arts in Brussels, Belgium, and La Rose des Vent in Lille, France. Kenawy has been awarded several prizes, such as the Dakar Biennale Award in 2006, the Best Animation Film Award at the National Egyptian Film Festival in 2006, the Global Crossings prize from the Leonardo International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology (ISAST), Los Angeles, USA in 2005, the Egyptian National Prize for Art, Science, Literature for using video as a visual medium in 2005, and the UNESCO grand prize at the International Cairo Biennale in 1998.

William Wells has been involved in development and education in the arts for over twenty-five years. Born in Alberta Canada, Wells moved to England in the early 1970s to study. A graduate of History and the Arts from the University of London, he proceeded to work for the Arts Council of Great Britain and, in the early 1980s, was one of the initial founders of Unit Seven Studios and Gallery in South London. In the late 1980s, he moved to Egypt permanently. In 1990, he established Part One Design in Gizeh and taught Middle Eastern history and art courses in several local and international schools in Cairo. In December of 1998, he created the Townhouse Gallery as a platform for emerging artists in the region as well as for providing accessibility to the contemporary discourse surrounding the arts today. Today, the gallery consists of three exhibition halls, a space for performing arts, six resident artist studios, a project room, a theater laboratory, an archive of contemporary artists, a library, and two shops.

Beirut

A Terrifying Film, Endlessly Repeated, Potentially Deleted

*Abdulmohsin,
November 2005*

1 We presume too much when we think that we know a country well, merely because we know about its literature, art, or culture, no matter to what extent we know the latter. I became aware of this presumption as the dates for my arrival in Cairo and Beirut approached. I thought I knew Cairo because of its novels and films. These had played a role in establishing a geographical and societal understanding of Cairo in each one of us, particularly those of us who only had access to two television stations which considered the continuous broadcast of Arabic films (by which Egyptian films were meant, naturally) to be a part of the “nationalist Arab struggle.” One’s memory becomes replete with the names of alleys, streets, avenues and neighborhoods, and fooled into thinking that one has become familiar with them, unable to distinguish between fact and the fictional world created by expert dream-makers. But, what about Beirut, then? Does knowing Lebanon’s art and culture well entitle one to claim being familiar with it? Do I presume to know it because there is not a single Iraqi artist or writer who has not had their own dream of Beirut before visiting it? Or maybe this feeling of familiarity stems from the fact that almost every single Iraqi poet and novelist has had a Beirut phase, or that it is our “haven of democracy...”

These and many other questions were on my mind while I was still on the plane, flying from Egyptian into Lebanese skies. Those whom I interviewed met my questions about Beirut with both patience and answers, the wonderful poet Abbas Baydoun shouldering most of the burden. Baydoun spoke to us of Beirut: the city, the school of poetry,



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the cultural refuge, the civil war, the formation of the nation, and a society seeking for answers.

“BEIRUT NO LONGER HAS A HEART, AND WE ARE NOW LEFT SEARCHING”

An interview with the Lebanese Poet Abbas Baydoun

Faris: *Beirut has often been associated with the history of poetry, especially contemporary poetry. Its name became linked with modern poetry starting with Al-Sayyab, and then the Poetry Journal movement, and the appearance of the prose poem among Arab poetry. We know that you live in Beirut, and have published most of your poetry there. My question to you is: How do you view the relationship between poetry and Beirut?*

Abbas: I have always thought that the best way to describe Beirut is to compare it to Paris, which has not only always been a cultural center for the French, but which has also been a haven for artists and writers from all over the world. When I think of Paris, I think of a place that is full of opposing directions and currents, and home to a multiplicity of talents. It is a place where plurality has been able to flourish. I also like to think about Beirut in this way.

Beirut has hosted a wide ranging constellation of Arab poets. Serving as a link between the East and West, the city engenders a uniquely free and collaborative atmosphere, and has provided poets with the chance to find their own voices, and live out their artistic potentials in full. It has provided them with a space in which to find the freedom to break any taboos, or at least to overcome certain linguistic, intel-



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lectual and cultural preconceptions. When we talk about the school of Beirut, we must remember that we are talking about the same school in which Mohammad al-Maghout, Adonis, and Mahmoud Darwish were able to mature. I use the word mature because I am certain that they would not have been able to find the right environment in which to develop their work anywhere else but in Beirut, and because it was in Beirut that these poets really began their work. They and many others were able to produce their best work in Beirut without having to worry about intellectual or cultural taboos, or experience social opposition or pressure from the established literary world.

Almost every important Arab poet has had a Beirut period. Even Al-Sayyab and other poets who grew up and matured outside of Beirut, and outside of the context of the Lebanese experience, have had a Beirut period.

As I was saying, however, we must distinguish between poets who have been influenced by working in Beirut, and Lebanese poets.

Lebanese poetry is something unique in itself. Its elements can be summarized as including a preoccupation with form, technique and linguistic distillation. It also utilizes a kind of global imagination, somewhat removed from local spaces and language. In short, the major Lebanese contribution to Arabic poetry has been the prose poem, which underwent a period of intense maturation in Beirut. In fact, the second cycle of Arab poetry was practically fermented in Beirut, before later moving on to the rest of the Arab world from there. The Beirut that I have described as a school comparable to Paris no longer exists, however. The political, social and economic situation, in addition to other factors, have led those Arab poets who matured in Beirut to move on to other capitals, where they are now continuing



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their experiments, many of which began in Beirut. Lebanon is no longer a haven for these people.

Faris: *Beirut is no longer a haven?*

Abbas: That is correct.

Abdalmohsin: *Lebanon has undergone many changes, beginning with the civil war of 1975, followed by the Israeli invasion of 1982 and the Taef Accord which later ended the war, the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, and – last, but not least – the assassination of Rafik Al-Hariri, and the arrival of a new political force on the scene. These all became reasons for Beirut no longer to remain a destination for intellectuals, the city no longer providing them with a democratic climate in which to work. How do you perceive these events to have effected Beirut – the city, its space, and its culture?*

Abbas: I can affirm that Beirut was not emptied of Arab intellectuals due to the war, because they themselves were a part of it. Because the two of you are Iraqis, I would like to point out that many Iraqi friends of mine belonged to Palestinian organizations, and were very present during the war. During the first phase of the war, Beirut was overflowing with Arab intellectuals. In fact, it was the ideal place of exile for them.

Abdalmohsin: *...a voluntary place of exile for them?*

Abbas: Yes, but things changed after the Israeli invasion, when most of the Arab intellectuals left. Since then, Beirut has become emptied of them.

Beirut, like all of Lebanon, was disconnected during the war. People stayed indoors to avoid the violence, or restricted their movements to their own neighborhoods, rarely leaving them at all. Every household and neighborhood became a socially and economically self-sufficient unit, redefining traditional ways of thinking about space. The only actual space became the living space – the home. People toured the world from inside their houses. They lived, saw, and reflected by staring out of their bedroom windows. When the roads and everything else outside are dangerous, a person returns to their den, to their home, even when that too has become dangerous because it might end up being the target of a random bomb. The home and the bomb shelter begin to make up the fabric of people's lives. During the war, the street was left to the others... to invaders, to fighters, to those who were creating the danger and living in it. Moreover, Beirut was divided during the war into East and West Beirut, with a kind of middle zone left only to the fighters. This created a huge hole in the heart of the city... in what really was the city's heart. Imagine an East

and a West, with an enormous line, a no-man's land, separating the two. This was in no way a ceasefire line, however. That was not even an option to be considered.

Faris: *It was a sacred space...*

Abbas: Well, it was a forbidden space. A space left to fighters. After the two cities were reunified, this line – or sacred space – remained not only in peoples' imaginations, but also in their lives. This indicates that psychological barriers are still present, but also that other barriers, such as economic and social ones, have not disappeared either. After the reunification, what began was a cautious coming together that evolved very slowly and took place mostly in the former no-man's land. What is now the reconstructed heart of the city had at that time been completely destroyed. I can now say, however, that Beirut is in the process of coming together again. The two Beiruts have met up again in the former no-man's land, which is of great significance. In regard to the reconstruction project, the heart of Beirut – which is a considerable geographical chunk of the city – was rebuilt by a foreign corporation. The developers dealt with the old architecture of the city fairly respectfully, but nonetheless, in order to expand it and turn it into a prestigious tourist and entertainment district, destroyed a part of it. This is the most urban place in Beirut, and the only place left which is in any way reminiscent of other old cities, such as Paris.

Faris: *...as seen in terms of being a civilized city?*

Abbas: As seen in terms of being urban. The idea of civilization is something different. I am talking right now about cities like Paris, and not Rio de Janeiro, which is a post-modern city. Let us just say that it is reminiscent of the "classy" type of city. A city with one architectural style, and a uniform architectural vernacular. Solidere is like this as well. The center of Beirut can be seen as the facade of the city, but this facade has been separated completely from its primary function of actually working as a city center. It is no longer the heart of the city. The heart has been turned into a tourist resort, a place for entertainment. This area is largely detached and has become a kind of island. It may be a kind of aristocratic island... or even a luxurious island, but it is still an island. It is an island in Solidere, the geographical heart of a city. It had truly and literally been its popular heart before the war. Beirut no longer has a heart, and we are now left searching. In Paris, for example, there are many centers... there are many hearts. Yet, despite Beirut's smallness, we are not able to find a single center in the entire city. Therefore, by necessity, we have many different centers, each with its own function. This takes us away from the

definition of a true city. Beirut, to a large extent, is - to quote my friend Issam Abdallah - "a cluster of cities," or, as I prefer to put it, a cluster of some sort or the other.

Faris: How does the loss of the city's heart hurt its artists?

Abbas: I am not trying to say that there is a wound there. I do not want to be that melodramatic about it. What I do want to say is that the loss of the center is the spatial symbol for the loss of the state, or of the society. I am talking about a series of losses, about a state that still is not there, and about attempts being made to create it every day. We have a government of images. The two of you might say in response: all governments in the region are like this. I agree, but Lebanese society is thinking hard about the Lebanese nation, and demanding more of it than any other place in the Arab world. Yes! Lebanon is a land torn apart. It is a country where religious sects fight over power, the government, the economy, the nation's politics and culture. I know it is believed that this sort of country can never rise, but this belongs to the classical way of thinking about things, and it is simply untrue. A nation with conflicts such as these contains vitality, and produces the desire to establish a flourishing society. Though competing sects have all fought against one another in the past, they are all interacting in one way or the other. In this interaction, there are some conflicts which lead to confrontation, but at the heart of all of this is the desire for a national project. This struggle to reach the center has also become an important part of the Lebanese novel, which continues to resuscitate that dramatic point of transition. It distinguishes itself in this way from the Arabic novel, which is preoccupied with grand historical movements, slow social changes, and a calm path leading toward death. We are now in a moment of conflict, division, and transition. This is the moment most represented in the Lebanese novel. Lebanese poets, I believe, are also inspired by this moment.

*Diaries continue,
Abdulmohsin*

- 2 Our trip to Beirut coincided with Homeworks 3, a forum on cultural practices that began on November 7, the day after we arrived from Cairo. The forum was a major opportunity for me - the graduate of three wars and both internal and external sanctions that had whittled away at our flesh and our nerves - to watch and listen, debate, meet, and think about the advances made in the region in the fields of art and literature, and the progress made by those in touch with developments in the heart of Europe or other countries near to it. One of my most vivid impressions at the forum was the dominance of digital technology. There was hardly a single presentation that did not attempt

to use this technology, whether in static-visual, animated, or audio form. I also noticed that a lot of young people's work appeared to be completely dissociated from the set of realities surrounding it, totally uprooted from its origins, and did not reflect their own identities. Furthermore, some of the things presented did not display genuine artistic consciousness. In fact, some things shown seemed more like three-dimensional games played-out in artistic-looking settings.

My attention was captivated by a play titled *Who's afraid of Representation?* presented by Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué, and artistically directed by Samar Macaron. I actually saw the play more than once, because it was put on three times due to popular demand. The play brought up, once again, though in a different format, the issue of the war, an issue that I believed was closed after the war had ended. Is it sufficient that art and culture alone handle this issue without being accompanied by the necessary social changes? What about the people who are still missing? What about the foundation of a culture of peace in every individual, and in society as a whole? We discussed these disturbing and violent questions with Lina and Rabih for a long time. Since the end of the Lebanese civil war, Lebanon seems to be occupied with putting its internal affairs back in order and posing its political questions anew. This preoccupation has intensified over the past couple of years, taking on a new direction. A panel I attended elucidated this new direction and lent more depth to the issues raised in the play I had seen. The discussion focused on the repercussions of the assassination of Rafik Al-Hariri, his funeral in February 2005, the demonstration on the 7th and 8th of March, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, and the continuous protests and sit-ins which have been taking place within the country. The panel was led by the poet and researcher Bilal Khbeiz and was attended by political theorist Wissam Saadeh, journalist and founder of the political supplement-newspaper "Tends of Al-Hayat," Hazem Saghieh, political activist Nahla Shahhal, and economic analyst Kamal Hamdan. I was very impressed by their courage in taking on the issues - this, I felt, stemmed from a long tradition of freedom. I also felt this at a lecture by the journalist and novelist Mohammad Abi Samra entitled "Lebanon at Two Demonstrations," in which he held a daring discussion with many members of Lebanese political circles. As I was listening, I wondered how much time we Iraqis would need to have honest politicians and writers who directly state their intentions without lying to themselves and to the receivers?

- 3 I found Lebanese intellectuals to have a deep understanding of Iraq's issues, and a similar quest for identity, marred by a fear that the demons of war would once again awaken and emerge; they were also searching for the best ways to achieve reconciliation between all the different sides, particularly since the two societies were similar in terms of their mixtures of different religions, sects and ethnicities. We discussed this with the anthropologist and novelist Iman Humaydan Younes. The conversation with her was just as special as her two novels, which I enjoyed reading greatly, *Ba'... mithl bait mithl Beirut* (B like Bayt like Beirut) and *Toot Barri* (Wild Mulberry).

"IN THEIR HEARTS, PEOPLE HAVE NOT REACHED RECONCILIATION"

An Interview with the Lebanese Writer Iman Humaydan Younes

Abdulmohsin: *I have the impression that Lebanese intellectuals and Lebanese citizens in general have a special understanding of what is taking place at present in Iraq. There are parallels in the two countries concerning the multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian nature of their societies and the resulting search for a cultural identity. What now seems potentially dangerous to me, however, is the tendency to try and forget what has taken place. This is becoming a pressing issue. I was elated to read the memoirs of Youssef Bazzi on the war, titled "Yassir Arafat looked at me and smiled." In that piece, Bazzi was immensely honest and spelled out his position clearly. He describes, for example, how he had led a group of fighters out on a mission, and how he was involved in bombings; how he saved one person, and how another person was killed. The conscious act of forgetting, however, is dangerous. Memory can explode at any moment.*



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Iman: I have an opinion on this matter. The subject of remembrance is always an issue in post-war societies, and it is often dealt with in various and sometimes contradictory ways. For example, a state might deal with it by attempting to obliterate real memory by creating an alienated, abstract version. Civil society organizations and institutions tend to work in narrow circles, involving intellectuals and activists who are usually somewhat detached from the people whose memories need to be shared and documented. Instead of holding conferences and discussing memory from an external perspective, I believe that it is best to work directly with the people who have actually suffered, experienced loss, and been victims of violence. We need to investigate how they have overcome their suffering. The external approach to dealing with memory is not only applied on the cultural level but on the academic level as well, especially in the humanities. When I was working on my masters thesis, I focused specifically on the experiences and stories of families whose members had disappeared in Lebanon. I looked at how they perceived their own narratives and the actual stories behind their children's disappearance, focusing specifically on female family members. I noticed that, as intellectuals, we often fail to acknowledge the internal and local dynamics that people depend on in overcoming violence or finding a way to bring a sense of reason to it. We need to learn how to understand these dynamics. The underlying concept behind them is that life is a greater force than death. Sociologists also fail to acknowledge these dynamics, in my opinion, largely because methods of research are largely detached from real social experiences.

There is an anthropologist named Michael Jackson who has worked in Africa and was witness to the massacres and ethnic cleansing perpetrated there. He focused on how certain people were able to overcome their experiences and suffering. One mother had been



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forced to watch her children being killed in front of her... How was this woman able to deal with that situation? He did not approach his field research with any previous opinions on memory, nor was he asked to establish any kind of reconciliation commission like it was done in South Africa. In that country, people were encouraged to speak out publicly, and victims were offered the opportunity to forgive, or not to forgive, before trying to forget. This system may be successful, but there are other structures within our own societies that we need to recognize as means for achieving reconciliation and continuity, methods that are connected to our own experiences. Religion, faith, tribal culture and familial bonds can all help us to process the past. I acknowledge all of these means and do not consider them old fashioned in any way. Even democracy has to be tailored to our own needs. In Lebanon, it is impossible to establish a democracy in the classic sense, in terms of it producing the rule of the majority. We are a country composed of many minorities whose specificities need to be respected. Each culture and country has had its own distinct experience, and it is important that we develop concepts which have been produced in other countries further, so that they can address our needs more effectively. The war and the killings in South Africa, for example, had an entirely different background than the civil war here did, causing different factors to come into play... Memory and reconciliation need to be offered from within the experience of a nation.

Abdalmohsin: *The Lebanese experience is incredibly similar to the Iraqi one at the moment. It has taken on the form of a reconciliation process involving the top levels of society and does not extend to the base. I think the country which has gone through a process like this and resembles ours the most is not South Africa, but Morocco, where people are gathered in an unofficial court room, and where victims confront their torturers, many of whom worked in the secret service and in the prisons.*

Iman: The experience created by the South African “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” headed by Desmond Tutu is worthy of study and, in many aspects, could be a superb model for further implementation. The reconciliation process in Morocco has been a pioneering experience in the Arab world, and though it might be too early to discern its effectiveness, it remains a very important experiment. It is important to note that honest confrontation is absent as a concept from the Arab political lexicon. I still believe we need to look and see if reconciliation will be achieved in Morocco. Are we ready and able to give up certain concepts from our own cultural, social, and political heritage, like that of revenge?

Abdalmohsin: *Do you fear that failing to discuss matters involving truth and reconciliation in a country like Lebanon could be a source of danger?*

Iman: Of course I do. I will tell you why the current situation here is frightening; it is because people have not yet been reconciled with one another. What you mentioned earlier about reconciliation among the elite not reaching the masses is truly problematic. We have a sectarian society in Lebanon. Politics and political relations cross sects and not party lines. Our ideological parties no longer exist. This is not only because of the wars, but because ideological parties worldwide have almost completely disappeared. My real fear is that, in their hearts, people have not reached any kind of reconciliation. The reconciliation between members of the upper levels of society took place between warlords who then became the nation's politicians, ministers, and representatives in peace time. True reconciliation cannot happen until these very people stand up and admit to what they did during the war and begin to embark on a process of becoming accountable; they need to admit that they have harmed their country, their people, and thousands of innocent civilians. If those from within the leadership, who are models to many people, do not take such steps, nothing will change.

As it stands now, the exclusion of this process is hindering the formation of a nation state in which everyone is equal before the law. Unfortunately, this practice of concealing the truth influences the broader population and becomes an accepted part of political life. Until now, not one political figure has come out to declare publicly and officially to the families who have lost loved-ones that their loved-ones have been killed, that the families would receive any compensation, or that there would be any kind of national service in their honor. We are also in need of a symbolic burial ritual, because many bodies have still not been found. Even when communal graves have been found, there has been resistance on the part of the authorities to excavate them. Not a single politician wants to take responsibility for initiating the excavation of the bodies or the commencement of symbolic burials. You know what waiting means: families paralyzed in the terrifying pain of waiting.

This brings me to the current situation in Lebanon with all the fuss about who exactly was behind the death of Rafik Hariri. I too want to know who killed him. It is wonderful that we want to start with the culture of truth, and while we are at it, I want to know who kidnapped the seventeen-year-old boys as they were walking down the street, who killed them, and why they have never been returned to their homes and families. I want to know who those people were who broke into peoples' homes and killed all who lived there, without sparing the women and children. How can we say we live in peace when these

criminals are still among us and remain unpunished? We do not even know who they are! It is not enough for me to know who killed Rafik Hariri. I want to know about the disappeared. Where are their killers? Who killed them? These were citizens too, and I see them as being equally as important as Rafik Hariri. I fear that the inquiry which began in February 2005 is only temporary, and that it will not be incorporated as a process into our political culture.

The need to know the truth should be part of our culture and social structure. This has nothing to do with revenge at all, but, to the contrary, it is the only way to free ourselves from all the feelings of hatred, which will certainly persist as long as the truth remains absent. The important thing in all of this is that the motivation for finding out the truth is to allow us to re-establish faith in justice and move beyond the painful past.

Abdulmohsin: *This has become a cultural issue and not only a social one.*

Iman: Not only cultural. It has become a vital issue affecting the fates of many people. Lebanon today is brimming with cultural and artistic undertakings, which are pushing people toward thinking and reflecting upon their society and lives. Eighty percent of these activities, however, are funded through non-local resources. I am not saying this to endorse any kind of nationalism, nor do I insist that everything should be produced locally – what I want to focus on is that cultural activities in a country should be a part of the consciousness of its people. The private sector should understand that one of its primary responsibilities is to protect and endorse the independence of cultural activity. In turn, the state and the cultural ministry have to realize the importance of culture and of funding related activities, instead of leaving the work of their own local artists to the mercy of overseas funding institutions. Artists offer ideas which are often discarded when funding is not offered. There are a lot of wealthy people in our country, and a lot of businessmen who make a lot of profit. Why should they not be able to provide some of that wealth to support culture in their country? Why not? Why should a writer or a theater director wait for funding from the West? Why should this be going on, when a new restaurant or a new bar is being opened every day? It is an unnatural situation, and we cannot continue in this way. Artists and writers are becoming like beggars. There are other countries in which thought plays a supreme role. I personally do not have any expectations however; all I can hope for is to be able to continue writing.

Abdulmohsin: *The same goes for me! The support of artists is of utmost importance for the progress in society.*

Iman: I follow the trends involving the Lebanese novel, and I see that a great deal is being said, especially in novels written by women. I do not like to emphasize literature as being “feminist,” because I do not know what is meant exactly by that term. However, we do have many woman writers, almost the same number as there are male writers. There is something special about a narrative voice that is allowed to speak for the first time. Most of the books written by male authors have a loud narrative tone; it is difficult to get rid of polemics in their novels. I do not see a lot of that in women’s fiction though, which is what makes their work distinct. These novels are about things that have not been discussed before, such as describing war from an emotional point of view as opposed to a simply external description. An exception is the writer Huda Barakat, who always uses a male narrator in an attempt to deconstruct the complexities of masculinity and view these from a different angle.

The Lebanese post-war novel is more daring and much freer in accessing our communal stories, stories concerned with people and places. For that reason, I like the fiction of Ulwiyya Subh about southern Shi’ite society, and the poor who come to Beirut without having any idea about what life might be like in the city. Novels today deal with families, their deconstruction, and migration to the city – a historical political panorama of many sectors of Lebanese society. The post-war novel provides a new gaze at identity, roots, family and so on. I do not think this is purely a Lebanese phenomenon. In my reading, I see the same trend in the fiction of Egyptian writers such as Miral Tahawi, Siham Badawi and May al-Tilmisani. I follow the trends of women writers in general, but not because I am biased towards women’s writing or am some kind of female fanatic. I have found, however, that fiction written by women in the Gulf has achieved a new and unique narrative tone.

**Faris, November
2005**

1 I did not get the opportunity to give readings of my poetry in any of the cities I visited, except for Beirut. There, I received an invitation from the Lebanese poet Nazem al-Sayyed to give a reading at Jadal Byzanti, a poetry salon, where I was to be a guest at a party given in honor of a French poet in his sixties, whose name I have forgotten, and whose poems were read in translation by the person who had introduced him, the illustrious Lebanese poet Abbas Baydoun. Flanked by photographs of dead and living poets, I read one of my poems to an audience of no more than fifteen people. After having finished reading, I scrutinized their faces, and saw in them that, unlike what I had believed, poetry was dying in this city, and that

those from this group were among the few people still trying to keep it alive. As I returned their welcoming smiles while exchanging toasts, I wished that what I had read in their eyes had just been a passing thought. I had always known Beirut for its great poets, and the vast quantities of poetry books published there; now in Jadal Byzanti, I refused to believe that Beirut's poetry audience had dwindled. As I walked back to my hotel, I told myself that everything in the city might fade away, but that poetry would not.

We were staying in Hamra Street near Al-Madina Theater, which allowed us to observe the third installment of the Homeworks cultural and artistic festival from close up. The festival featured lectures and art exhibitions, and was attended by artists and intellectuals from Lebanon, the Arab countries, and the rest of the world. At this particular festival, I noticed the considerable increase in visual arts among contemporary Arab art, especially in video art, compared with its almost total absence in Iraq. I also could not help but to compare the problems arising from the need for funding in the two countries. Before 2003, it was forbidden for artists in Iraq to seek external funding; in fact, even entertaining the idea was tantamount to political "treason." This kept hundreds of artistic and cultural dreams on the shelves, subject to the conditions of government funding and the whims of censors.

Most of the young people I met in Beirut during the "Homeworks" festival, including video artists, seemed to be in their twenties. Though the work produced by most of them seemed artistically to be a kind of puberty phase on its way to maturation, I discovered that it had already been shown in festivals within Lebanon and in other countries, some of it repeatedly, having often received funding. Lebanese artists and intellectuals have been able to invest the funds that they have received from external donors into cultural work and festivals, and, therefore, have turned the country into a continuous artistic festival, practically financially independent, while the state flounders in the economic and financial costs of post-war peace. Homeworks had barely come to a close when the next international film festival began.

It was inevitable then, that I found most young Lebanese artists to be somewhat relaxed, confident that their projects would find their way from the paper to the public, and thereby relatively calm when contemplating the whole experience. Now and then, I would scent in this relaxation a whiff of the Lebanese Civil War, which had ended in the early 1990s. The war had been dispersed throughout artists' work as insistent questioning, cloaked in exceedingly calm contemplation. It was a questioning opposed to the official political discourse in the

present, which desires to close this topic forever, afraid to rake up the past, because "Lebanon has not yet been able to heal the wounds left by the civil war," as Usama Ba'albaki, the Lebanese painter, told me. More than one artist I met expressed their discontent with what they described as a form of censorship on topics concerning the war. This was the case to such an extent that it became almost a given that we end up discussing what I began calling "civil war censorship" with the artists and writers I met, while having conversations about their projects. As I said to a Lebanese novelist, "The fear of war returning because of a text or piece only means that it has not disappeared." She then replied, "It also means that we are still not there," referring of course to Lebanese intellectuals as opposed to Lebanese politicians.

On the other hand, the bitter experiences left behind by the civil war mean that most Lebanese are well aware of the major contradictions involved in the current situation in Iraq. Among Lebanese intellectuals and artists, it was not common to find those arrogant, dogmatic mental abstractions that I have spoken of before, in insisting upon the enemy's enemy being a friend, and the friend's enemy being an enemy - ideas that were widespread in the other Arab countries we had visited. Most of those whom I met with spoke to me - with one eye still gazing back at Lebanon's blood-soaked past - about their worries over what was happening in my home country, knowing that liberating Iraq from occupation must be done in a way which ensures that Iraqi blood is spared, and that peaceful resistance must begin.

Maybe the most visible signs of war experience and suffering were those I found in the work of most Lebanese artists who, seeking not to express their experience in any conventional way, tried rather to address it from an existentialist perspective, showcasing the immeasurable extent of destruction that war inflict upon existence itself. This idea was clearly visible in the majority of artistic works that I saw here, and the one that had the greatest impact on me was a theatrical piece by Rabih Mroué and Lina Sanneh.

"THOUGH IT MAY BE IN A DIFFERENT FORM, WE ARE STILL LIVING OUT THE WAR"

An interview with the Lebanese Artists Rabih Mroué and Lina Sanneh

Faris: The guns and cannons from the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991) have been silent for some time now, and life has returned to the country. How has theater in Lebanon been able to regain its vitality?

Lina: When the war ended, regions that had been closed down began to open up again, and artists who had been separated for a long time were finally reunited. A lot of young people who had been studying abroad returned, bringing their experiences along with them. It was a time marked by enthusiasm, reconstruction, and a will to rebuild the nation. Lebanon's theaters were reopened, and there was a huge amount of interest and a great desire to return Beirut to its so-called "golden-age," referring to the 1960s. There was an entire generation of young people who had completed or were just about to complete their university degrees, and were enthusiastic about starting up new projects. The first theater to be opened after the war was the Beirut Theater, followed by Al-Madina Theater. Lebanon saw an outburst of cultural, artistic and specifically theater-oriented activity and energy, which was translated into a number of productions. Moreover, a lot of directors and artists from the 1960s and '70s returned to the theater to continue their work. This led to many theater productions after the war becoming something like variations on Lebanese theater experiments from the 1960s and '70s, causing many artists from the younger generation to go on and search for a new kind of theater.

Abdalmohsin: *Rabih, I feel that there is great danger that the issue of the civil war in your country will be forgotten, and that a critical period will be purposefully and carelessly erased from the nation's consciousness, without any criticism or analysis. I have noticed that there have been some attempts to address this question in the arts, such as in your dramatic piece Who is Afraid of Representation?, which we have just seen. Do you think that confining these questions to the world of art and culture, however, will help healing the society?*

Rabih: After the war ended, a fierce debate between intellectuals and political authorities about memory and the war began, precisely because intellectuals were afraid that the war would be erased from the country's memory. We too were convinced of the need to remember and the need to combat the tendency to forget. After some time had passed, however, intellectuals saw that human beings sometimes also need to forget. Nobody can sustain themselves on memories. Just as there are things which must be remembered, there are also things which must be forgotten. As far as our experiences working in theater after the war are concerned, I would say that we absolutely insisted on bringing up the subject of the civil war, but only from a distance. For the most part, we avoided mentioning the horror and atrocities experienced by so many. In other words, we aimed at providing reflection on the war without directly addressing it. This was our aim, and we hope to have achieved it.

Abdalmohsin: *But, unlike what you have just said, your work did address the war directly. The character of the mass-murderer, Hassan Ma'moun, confessed to the religious and ethnic causes behind his crimes, and the war was present in almost every scene of the play.*

Rabih: Hassan Ma'moun's story took place in Beirut in 2002, and was revealing the fact that the causes behind the war had still not been exorcised. This led us to go back to examining the roots of the war. The incident happened a decade after the war had ended, but the newspapers handled it in ways that reproduced the same rhetoric we knew from the war, with all its political and religious dimensions. During his trial, Hassan Ma'moun gave a different version of his story at each session held, revealing new motives and backgrounds for his crimes each time. Still today, these variations can be seen together as a kind of blueprint, reflecting the realities of the socio-political life of Lebanon. The trial can be seen as a miniature model of the causes leading up to the war; it is obvious that these are deeply rooted in the past, going even as far back as to the beginnings of Lebanon as a nation, and maybe even further.

These are all very complex issues, which the Lebanese often try to avoid. Lebanese from all across the religious spectrum condemned Hassan Ma'moun's actions. In doing this, however, they also rejected the arguments he had presented in court, which, in my opinion, were highly relevant and revealing. The case was treated as an ordinary crime, and the subject was eventually closed, deemed no longer worthy of discussion. This became my motivation for working on the character of Hassan Ma'moun, and presenting it in my work. I feel that, though it may be in a different form, we are still living out the war. The war is still present here somewhere. It is simply waiting for the right moment to come back out into the open. This does not mean that it will return in the same form, but it will inevitably reappear in new and violent manifestations, as was the case in Hassan Ma'moun's story.

Faris: *As you mention, it is in the interest of more than one side to silence the dialogue concerning topics as sensitive as this one. Do the censors allow such questions to be addressed directly?*

Rabih: Censors in Lebanon are like supervisors on school playgrounds. As long as the pupils are running around and fighting, and nobody is going around and snitching, the supervisor looks the other way. That is what censorship here is like. It does not get involved unless a citizen complains about a book, play or film; about a scene which might provoke religious tension, an erotic book which could offend Muslims or Christians, or a number of other things. Such a complaint would be enough for the censors to ban a book or a play. As far as drama goes, the law states that

censorship should be applied before the first public showing, unlike with publishing, for which any censorship comes after publication.

Faris: *How do Lebanese intellectuals look upon the existence of a law that provides for the enforcement of advance censorship to their work?*

Lina: There are many serious attempts underway to get rid of this problem. Lebanese intellectuals and dramatists have been complaining about censorship since the 1960s, but we have not been able to change this law. This is because the Lebanese government is so lazy that it does not even have the patience to open files that it considers to be unimportant, such as those dealing with theater censorship, in order to change the law. There is a law, for example, that establishes theaters as being similar to nightclubs, meaning that the entertainment tax for nightclubs is also applied to theaters (I do not know if this has been stopped by now). The state does orchestrate festivals and sometimes provides funding for theatrical productions now, but there has been no fundamental change. This lazy resistance to change dates all the way back to Ottoman times. It is also a result of the apathy typical of third-world regimes, and of the fact that changing the censorship law could bring the government into direct confrontation with the main religious sects in the country. All of these things make avoiding change a better option for the government than changing the law would be.

Abdalmohsin: *Let us talk more technically about theater. Can we speak of a new generation of Lebanese dramatists? What are this generation's characteristics?*

Rabih: I do not think that we can. It is a very difficult subject and needs a lot of discussion. I have noticed, however, that a new generation of artists is focusing on video art. Video art is now considered to be an



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effective new medium of expression, and an exciting phenomenon to be studied, in place of theater. There are theatrical experiments underway, and there are a few pieces out now, but we cannot really talk about any briskly developing theater movement in the country. Theater is moving very slowly.

Lina: Yes, it is. In my opinion, there needs to be a much larger body of work and more directors working before we can sketch out a general trend.

Faris: *So, there is no movement?*

Rabih: No, there is no movement. We are in a sort of slump.

Faris: *How about individual projects?*

Rabih: Individual projects have always been seen in Lebanon. The government is not involved in these and does not offer any funding. There have been phases of active theatrical production, but we are not in one of those at this time. There are some productions underway, but I do not know how long the current amount of output will last. Video has a very strong presence in the cultural life here, and there is a wide array of cinema festivals. There are more than six or seven film and video festivals taking place in the country, and they are very exciting and tend to reach large audiences.

Faris: *This is very sad for the theater...*

Rabih: Yes, it is sad for theater, but it is also positive because there are many other art forms that are now developing and flourishing.



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- 2 Our stay in the heart of Beirut allowed me, to some extent, to examine the life of the city, which has always been different from life in other Arab societies. The mixture of Christian and Muslim cultures in the country over centuries has produced a way of life and of forming human relationships that is almost radically different from that in the rest of the Arab world. In this case, I am not talking about traditional or religious Christian culture, but rather about that which resulted from the European reformation in Germany and England and produced societies different from the ones that had remained under the Church's control for hundreds of years, subjugating most aspects of society to religious restrictions, and subsequently banning many sectors of life.

While it is unnecessary to mention that the essential distinction between life in Lebanon and in its peer Arab societies concerns the relationship between men and women, it was nonetheless new to me to see a young couple openly embracing each other in front of passers-by, along the shores of the Mediterranean. My thoughts wandered eastward, to the village that I was born in, where I remembered that a woman in my tribe had been killed by her brothers, who had then effaced any signs of her grave, because they had heard from another village woman - without any proof - that she had smiled at a young man in the Souq (market). While I wished that the young Lebanese couple had allowed me to take a picture of them kissing, I contented myself with staring at the sand, and contemplating the fate of Arab women amidst past and present taboos. I suddenly had the illusion to see the word *honor* floating on the waves.

Watching the many lovers scattered along the shore led me to contemplate the post-war peace that they were enjoying. The many conversations that I had had about the civil war, the wars with Israel, and projections for the future really lead me to feel, as I walked through some of Beirut's streets, the souls of the Lebanese who had lost their lives in the wars of the past. I felt the souls filling up space and mingling with people. I thought about what Rabih Mroué had told me about the need for them to discuss the war from a distance, to think about it more than to talk about it. Beirut's seafront was full of construction sites. I told myself that this amount of building was perhaps exaggerated, as Abbas Baydoun had described it to me adding, "so much so, that the inhabitants have been completely absorbed by the sheer numbers of these buildings, and the city seems to have been emptied of its dwellers entirely." My emotion quickly overrode the poet's words, however, and it occurred to me as I stood there with the waves

washing over my feet that an exaggerated life is still primarily a life, and is - above all else - a space that provides the Lebanese individual with the shelter of a healing roof under which they may dream, act, and think of change.

"I WAS CALLED A TRAITOR BY FRIENDS OF MINE FOR NOT PARTICIPATING IN THE WAR"

Statement of the Lebanese Filmmaker Borhane Alaouié

Beirut was at its cultural peak before the war started; every single day was a celebration of international scope. Nothing comparable could be found throughout the region. Cairo may have experienced something similar at the turn of the previous century, during the "nahda" (Arabic renaissance). In Beirut, before the war, every single day was a cultural celebration of international scope. It was the fertile ground on which artists and intellectuals were able to develop and produce work. It was in that climate that I was able to make the movie *Kafr Qasem*.

[...]

What made me consider cinema as a tool or a weapon for the first time was my visit to Europe right after 1967. It was during a time in which many Europeans thought that Palestine was uninhabited. They did not know about the refugees. Jean-Paul Sartre was demonstrating alongside a million others in Paris in support of Israel. The unbelievably powerful media coverage is what made me consider cinema as a tool or a weapon for the first time. The issue provoked me even more in Europe than it had before. I could see the Jews, the Israelis and the Zionists defending themselves and arguing for their cause. Through the distance, this injustice, this attack against the Palestinians, an attack that might eventually expand to include others, became more provocative. This was the reason why I shot the movie *Kafr Qasem*, depicting the Palestinian issue. I was convinced that portraying the enemy and the reasons behind the resistance would be useful, and I believed that it was essential to present this side of the story to Europe. I did not make this film in order to portray the resistance itself, but more as an attempt at explaining why the resistance was there. Shortly thereafter, the war erupted in Lebanon. I had experienced the incidents of 1958¹ in Beirut, and I immediately sensed that they had served as a rehearsal for the civil war, which some have called the war

¹ In 1958 Lebanon went through a political crisis that was rooted in a conflict with Egypt and developed into a conflict between Christian and Muslim factions in the Lebanese society.

of strangers, the war of the poor against the rich, or the Israeli war. I noticed how the same weapons had sprung up in the same locations, and how the neighborhoods were divided up in the same fashion, as if the incidents in 1958 had been like a small cough indicating an oncoming illness. In 1975, it became rapidly apparent that multiple conflicts would all be summed up as one specific issue: sectarianism. Once this happens, conflict becomes a civil war, and sects become extensions of external forces, as was the case in Lebanon. When the war started, I had just finished making *Kafr Qasem*. The Palestinian issue became a local, sectarian one in Lebanon, causing me to turn away from it. I could not participate in a situation in which mass murder was based on the content of people's identification cards. Neighborhoods were being bombarded simply because they were on the opposite side of the street, and the people who were dying were those who had had the least to do with deciding where that street should stand. I could no longer identify with anything present in Lebanon, including the Palestinian resistance, which pulled the rug out from beneath its own feet as soon as it started to take sides in the struggle. I guess the Palestinians made a big mistake there. With the war, cultural celebration underwent a transformation and turned into the kind of sectarian hysteria that divided Christians from Muslims, and Leftists from Rightists. I left the country from one day to the next, and I was called a traitor by friends of mine for not participating in the war. They demanded that I share that historical and glorious moment with them. It all seemed surreal. I felt the need to leave, and to distance myself. I wanted to stop screaming from the rooftops, although it was essential for the Palestinian cause to do so. I felt, however, that it was now the time to talk about ourselves, and about who we were.

[...]

I went to Egypt and shot a movie about the famous Egyptian engineer Hassan Fathi. It was the movie to follow that one, however, namely *Beirut Al-Liqa'* (Beirut - The Meeting), that focused on us. I had realized that the problem was not only the enemy. I started seeing the enemy as the tree that was hiding the forest. The forest was right here as the cause for how the enemy got here. So what was that forest? I had felt that the displacement of the Palestinians, which I had discussed in *Kafr Qasem*, was something horrible. Although the Israelis had claimed that this was to be an exception to the rule, we later had to realize that it was, instead, the rule. Not the rule laid down by Israel, but by the forest we were in. The Iraqi was displaced, as was the Kuwaiti, the Lebanese, the Palestinian, the Syrian and the Egyptian, each for their own reasons and in different ways. That small alleyway which the Israelis had created turned out to be a highway, the road we

all walked down. For *Beirut Al-Liqa'*, I chose two characters from the fringes of society that were also on the fringes of Lebanese factions. The scenario was written by Dr. Ahmad Baydoun, whom I consider to be a great star of the Arab drama. We decided to work on the fringes in order to be critical and harsh on ourselves, just as harsh as we were with our enemy. Beirut Al-Liqa' became a sort of dialogue in which nothing happens. To me, that is the epitome of dialogue. The dialogue takes place between Haidar and Zeyna, sitting alone in a room, trying to figure out what to do. One thinks he knows what to do, the other does not. They see each other as Romeo and Juliet, and talk with each other accordingly. The movie is entirely opposed to the war. You do not hear the sound of a single bullet, or a single slap in the face throughout the whole movie. It was focused particularly on these two characters, living during the Lebanese war. It is about the feeling of being murdered, and blown away.

[...]

Of course, I did not produce my movies in Lebanon. Arab cinema is very poor when it comes to production. Therefore, as movie makers, we experience an additional kind of displacement, the displacement of cinema. I always leave to raise money, and do not return until after two or three months. The return in itself is a celebration, even though you are coming back to film a tragedy. It then takes another one or two months to achieve the same state of mind as everyone else shares from within the country. This is necessary in order to talk to the people rather than to talk about them, to look on the inside from within, rather than from outside. I think this is a very important issue in the Arab world, since images from outside are so dominant. In terms of resemblance, self-images are like shadows. It is not easy to say which determines the other. You observe your own image as much as it observes you. In the Arab world, there is an unfortunate lack of observation of the inside from within.

As a sequel to the movie on Hasan Fathi, I shot *Al-Sadd al-'Ali* (The High Dam). While making the first one, I learned about the problems facing Egypt, and was amazed by this dam, which formed a sort of liberation, and was the first project, after Suez, to bring Arabs together on a single issue. The Arabs were one and the same when it came to building a dam! When I went there to see it, however, I discovered that this dam had grown according to its own wishes, not according to ours. Instead of having solved a problem, it had become a larger problem in itself. I started researching the causes. I went wherever Hasan Fathi led me. I saw that the dam had blocked roads and fields, obstructed the flow of mud, and that it was swallowing plots of land and transforming the whole of Egypt from an agricultural

nation into a nation of unemployment. Unfortunately, farmers are not qualified to work in other spheres, apart from immigrating to the city and selling tobacco, maybe. Though it is true that the dam is beneficial in terms of storing water, Seedna Yousef stored crops not water. I made three movies as extensions to Beirut al-Liqā'. One was called *A Letter from the Time of War* (Risala Min Zaman Al-Harb), the second was *A Letter from the Time of Exile* (Risala Min Zaman Al-Manfa), and the third was *To You, to What You Are* (Ilaika Ila Ma Takoon). These were three letters directed to each other, and, in my opinion, completed Beirut Al-Liqā'. That describes my entire body of Lebanese work. I am currently finishing up a movie called *Enough* (Khalas). That would conclude a certain phase, I think. These four movies are my testament to this phase.

[...]

I have travelled a lot, but my return journey to Beirut was the longest journey I have ever made. They said the war was over, but it was clear that a war cannot be terminated by a simple announcement. I knew that these buildings would fall again, because they were being built on the same, unstable foundation. I returned anyway, due to my children and my general situation. It was a special journey. It was a journey from one place of exile to another one, which happens to be your own country - the exact opposite of what exile should signify. I discovered how hard and, yet, how poetic it was to be in exile right where you are, in your own home, in your own bed, in the place where you were born. It was romantic, poetic, inspiring, and motivating. The fruit of this time for me was my movie *Ilaika Ila Ma Takoon*, dealing with life experiences resembling mine. I am like the night - it might be starry or it might be black. I built the film on characters that live at night, as if they were the second half. I still think of this trip as having been a very long one. It is going on five years now since I stepped off of the airplane. What breaks my heart is that my children, for whom I came back, now also have no other alternative than to leave. At least they are leaving of their own free will.

BIOGRAPHIES

Abbas Baydoun is a Lebanese poet and journalist who was born in southern Lebanon in 1945. He studied Arabic Literature at the Lebanese University in Beirut, and Middle Eastern Studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. He wrote on political issues before moving on to poetry and his lyric oeuvre comprises nine volumes. Baydoun is considered one of the most significant contemporary Arabic poets. He has been working as Cultural Editor of the Lebanese daily “Al-Safir” in Beirut since 1997 and published his first novel, *Tahlil Damm* (Blood Analysis), in 2002.

Iman Humaydan Younes is a Lebanese female writer and novelist. She has written two novels, *Ba’... mithl bait mithl Beirut* (B...like Beirut) in 1997, translated into French in 2004, about women during the Lebanese civil war, and *Toot Barri* (Wild Mulberry) in 2001, about a Lebanese Druze family in the early twentieth century, translated into German (in 2004), and translated into French and English (appearing soon). She is a researcher concerned with Lebanese post-war issues, especially war memories. In June of 2006, she received her masters degree in anthropology from the American University of Beirut. Her thesis was on the narratives of the families of people who disappeared during the Lebanese war in Lebanon. She also conducted several studies on development and the environment in Lebanon and participated in writing a book on Lebanese culinary heritage titled *Our Mountain’s Flavors*. Iman Humaydan Younes is also a freelance journalist, dealing mainly with cultural and social issues. She has been publishing articles and editorials in Arabic dailies and magazines since 1989.

Rabih Mroué was born in 1967 and is a Lebanese actor, director and playwright living in Beirut. He started working on his own productions in 1990. Since 1995, he has been working at the Lebanese television station Future TV as a writer and director of short animation films and documentaries. Mroué has also acted in, directed, and written several pieces. Among those more recent are *Make me Stop Smoking* (film, 2006), *Look at the Light Moving between the Buildings* (theater installation, 2006), *Leap into the Void* (installation, 2006), “Life is Short, but the Day is Too Long” (theater performance, 2004), *Who’s Afraid of Representation?* (play, 2004), *Looking for a Missing Employee* (play, 2003), *Bir-rouh Bid-damm* (short film, 2003), and *Biokhraphia* (play, 2002). The latter of these was a joint production with Lina Saneh.

Lina Saneh, a Lebanese artist and professor of theater born in 1966 and living in Beirut, has acted in, directed, and written several plays and performances for the theater, including *Extrait d’Etat Civil* (2000), *Ovrira* (1997), *The Chairs* (1996), and *Mouchakassa* (1993). Saneh teaches Theater Studies at Saint-Joseph University in Beirut, and at Saint-Esprit University in Kaslic. Both Saneh and Mroué question the various definitions of theater and the relationship between space and form in performance. Their work deals with socio-political issues that have been swept under the carpet in Lebanese society.

Mohamed Borhane Alaouié is a Lebanese filmmaker who obtained his degree in film-making from the Belgian film-school Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle (INSAS) in Brussels. Alaouié has realized a large number of movies. In addition to those mentioned in his statement, he also has made the short films “Affiche contre Affiche,” and “Forrière.” His feature length movie *Il ne suffit pas que Dieu soit avec les pauvres* (It is not enough that God stands by the poor) won him the first prize at the Art and Archaeology Festival in Brussels in 1980. The same year he shot the film *L’Emir* (The Emir), winning the screenplay prize of the Agency for Cultural and Technical Cooperation of Francophone Countries. His movie *L’Après Guerre du Golfe* (After the Gulf War), which he made in cooperation with four other film-directors, was presented at the Venice film festival and the film festival of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 1992 and 1993. Alaouié has been a jury member at film festivals held in Carthage, Creteil, Strasbourg and Khribka-Casablanca, and he taught film-making at the Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut and the Université Saint-Esprit Kaslik (USEK) between 1998 and 2000.

Baghdad ÷ Baghdad

Coming Home

By Faris Harram

1 On the morning of April 12, 2003, I found out just how easy it would have been to purchase up to fifteen rifles at once, as if I were buying glassware from any household goods store. The weapon-handlers' voices rose; each rifle cost approximately two dollars, each handgun three. I thought about the equivalent of thirty dollars in my pocket, when someone pressed my hand, pointing at a large tank parked about two hundred meters away, saying, "Those are the Americans." Before turning around to look, I began running toward a horse-drawn cart which was driving down the street. It was carrying eight to ten people, and I asked the passengers whether they were heading into Baghdad. One of them replied, "We will not be taking the main road," meaning Al-Taji Street, in the northern part of Baghdad. I clambered on.

It has been three years now since this incident occurred, but the heat of that day still remains within me. This is not really due to the shock, but rather to the way in which the incidents of that far-off day served as an example of what was to come, and what is happening in Baghdad now. At that time, it had only been three days since the American army had invaded the city. I had moved with my little family, consisting of my wife and two of my brothers, from our home on Al-Taji Street (four kilometers north of Baghdad) to my father's home in Al-Taramiyya (thirty kilometers north of the city) on the orders of the Republican Guard. Its members had informed the residents of our compound, which consisted of forty houses, that we would have to leave. They said that the Americans had gotten too close to the area, and that a large battle would probably be taking place there. That was on April 4. The compound belonged to the governmental



engineering company that I worked for, and consisted of wooden caravans surrounded by a protective fence, set in the middle of an agricultural field encircled by farmhouses.

Three days later, on April 7, the Americans crossed Al-Taji at night, and entered into Baghdad without encountering any real resistance. From Al-Taramiyya, not expecting that the army would have crumbled so quickly, I listened to the sounds of massive explosions near my home in Al-Taji, thinking of the books I had collected over the course of twenty-five years. In the morning, my father, the religious Communist, woke me up, whispering, "Saddam has fallen." As I looked at the shock-induced wrinkles on his face, I thought at once that, with these three words, everything related to me and my personal life would be changed, and I spent a few minutes thinking about the hundreds of writers and poets who would disappear from the Iraqi literary scene, because their presence had been linked to the culture of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th party and had had no real basis in any artistic value. Before I got out of bed, my thoughts wandered over artistic projects and books that I had never dreamed of writing before, due to my fear of the security apparatus. I also remembered the dozens of writers who had left Saddam's country, and who would now return. The horizons of my life, which had until then been confined to home and work, suddenly began to expand geometrically in my mind.

I waited for days, hearing the news and rumors, before going down to Al-Taji Street to make sure that my house had not been damaged. It was on my way there that I had stopped to find out what the weapon dealers were up to. Now I found myself riding in that cart, along with eight to ten strangers, heading back towards my home. We crossed through date and orange groves, and vineyards on our roundabout way, avoiding the American troops, until we reached a tributary of the Tigris River. There, I got into a boat with four other people, crossed over to the other side, and walked with many others the five kilometers to Al-Taji Street. Those walking in the opposite direction told us that the Americans had been patrolling there and that they were searching for people with weapons. When I saw the dozens of Iraqi army tanks and artillery launchers burning in the fields and saw that our soldiers had been buried by villagers, I realized that any of my neighbors who had stayed had surely been killed, and that many of our houses had burnt down.

I began to make out the shape of our compound far off, and I do not know how I managed to run the final kilometer, despite being tired from my long walk, after someone had told me that a compound on the main road was being looted. I got to my house and saw three people dragging an air-conditioning unit on the ground outside,

and a woman in the kitchen window. I asked them "Why are you doing this?" They replied that it was because the house belonged to a security officer. I showed them my keys, laughing from the shock. This embarrassed them, which in turn embarrassed me. They helped me return the air-conditioning unit back into the house.

I had gotten married a month before the war had started, but when I walked into the house I did not find any signs left of the recent wedding. Our bedroom had been dismantled and had disappeared entirely, as if its existence had only been a dream. All of our presents had been stolen, as had most of my furniture from before the wedding. The only things that had been saved completely were my books, which I had decided to hide under my bed. While the bed was gone, the books had stayed in place. Of course, at that time, I had been more worried about theft than about looting. From afar, I saw a farmer whom I knew - he lived right outside the compound fence. I asked a looter to help me move some of my books to the farmer's house, and left the rest of the house in the care of another looter until my return. Out of pity, both agreed to assist me. I placed a few of the books on the bed cover, and asked the looter to drag them on the ground, while I placed others inside a bread oven on wheels, and we walked over together. On our way, we met other looters who laughed at our paltry takings, one of them saying, "You came too late." I returned from the farmer's house to pick up the rest of my books, and the two looters told me politely that they would not be able to help me any further and went off to loot my neighbors' houses. That day, my unfit body was unexpectedly taken over by a metaphysical power, which allowed me to spend two hours collecting and moving my books and other remaining possessions to the farmer's house, sometimes by dragging them in the bed cover across the ground, sometimes carrying two large bags slung over my shoulders. I was the only person from my neighborhood in that "concert-like" event.

It was night when I arrived back in Al-Taramiyya. The Americans had not yet arrived, and a few of the towns north of the capital were still in the hands of what was left of Saddam's army and the Syrian and Arab fighters. On my return trip, I spoke with a young man who told me that Russia was begging Saddam not to use the electrical rocket that it had designed for him because of concerns about American retaliation against Russia. As the looters' faces passed through my head, I asked him what he was referring to, and he explained that the rocket exploded in midair, releasing a mass of electricity that would hit enemy airplanes, causing them to crash. I was too exhausted to either laugh or cry.

2 Ten days later, on April 22, I met with a few of my friends in a coffee house. We all had one thought in common that day, which was that

we had “survived.” This led us to form a cultural and artistic group, which we called Najeen (Survivors). Of course, we were not the only writers and thinkers who had survived, and by survival we meant not only that we had survived the war, but also the entire Saddam era as well.

A week after that, we presented our first work – a play – in the burnt-out and destroyed ruins of the Al-Rasheed Theater. That same day, we published a manifesto in Arabic, Kurdish and English. Its opening sentence foreshadowed what was to come a few days later:

“The war is not over. What is now over is merely one aspect of it. What is left, more than anything else, is our own war. The remote-controlled war, the war of bombs is over, and the proximally-controlled war has started – the war of spirit, love and hatred, the war of tenderness and toughness. “Our” war has started whereas “theirs” has ended, and we find ourselves now standing face to face with each other. What possibilities will we have in our lives from now on?”

Two-and-a-half years after having written the Najeen manifesto, I saw Baghdad from an airplane for the first time in my life. I was leaving the city on a literary and cultural tour of neighboring capitals with my friend, the novelist Abdulmohsin Salih. The lady sitting next to me in the plane told me that when we returned, we would find that life had not changed, and I smiled at her optimistically, without answering. The earth was growing increasingly distant from the window, and neighborhoods began to take on the shape of big houses. Fields turned into patches of green. As the plane rose higher, even the most populated neighborhoods began to look like green patches as well. I had never known whether Baghdad was just a village or not.



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3 Abdulmohsin and I visited Damascus, Ankara, Istanbul, Cairo and Beirut. There, for the first time in two-and-a-half years, I saw people enjoying the night. We returned in December of 2005. The day after my return, before heading over to Baghdad University, my wife filled me in on all that had happened in Baghdad in my absence. As I listened, I realized that the pessimistic remarks made by the woman in the airplane had come true: Real life had become more crumbly in the face of the dream. Abstraction of ideas had reached a tragic, bloody form. It had become acceptable that two parties had begun fighting over “different thinking,” and residential neighborhoods were transformed into piles of corpses. The shards of broken glass left behind by “symbols and words” had lacerated the bare feet of the poor: from shouts of “resistance” to shouts of “terror,” from shouts of “the nation” to shouts of “the individual,” from “liberation” to “occupation” and from “old Iraq” to “new Iraq.” The belief system upheld by the young man who had told me about the electrical rocket had become the epistemological model ruling the fate of society, a model built on mythical consciousness, inflated heroes, and a widespread belief in conspiracies, reaching into the sphere inhabited by our political and religious elites.

Culturally, this is the natural product of Saddam’s pre-2003 village nation, with its improvisational economy and coercive upbringing, its rote education, its armed security forces, and one-track thought. It is also the product of the peoples’ return to what Charles H. Cooley calls “primary groups” (referring to the family, the tribe, and friendships based on mutual ideas and beliefs). People are content with these groups and feel safe within them, demonstrating that there has been no “urbanization” of social consciousness since the creation of the modern Iraqi nation at the beginning of the last century. Throughout its many phases and turning points, the only idea that has been fixed



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in the collective psyche is that “the nation” is something equivalent to the idea of “belief,” as opposed to land or people, and that the criterion for citizenship – starting in the 1920s and spanning across the political eras to follow – is defined solely by the bureaucracy of shared beliefs and ideologies. Whatever attempts “revolutionary” literature and art had made throughout the generations preceding Saddam’s arrival at transforming the idea of the “nation” into a shared set of values was exterminated by Saddam and his cynical use of clownish art and literature. In the end, he handed us an occupied nation which had been reduced down to one program: his program. Only in Saddam’s hands was “the nation” at the forefront of shared social values, afterwards becoming nothing but an abstract idea well suited for producing conflict.

- 4 The next day, I sat in class listening to a lecture on Descartes’ Cogito. The habitual naughtiness of the students added an ease to the lecture in the midst of the sounds of continuous explosions. The professor asked why I had been absent, and I told her about my travels. In response one of the other students joked, “You returned to Baghdad’s concert.” We smiled when an unfamiliar young man came into the classroom and whispered something to the professor, upon which they both rushed out of the room. The professor was the department chair, and she had just received the news that one of our classmates had been killed in sectarian violence. Some of us began to cry, but our emotional state remained for no longer than an hour, which is about how long shocks of that kind usually take to be absorbed by us. What then comes is an existential tremor, which resonates deep down within the individual’s enormous sense of alienation, dragging him down into the lowest levels of common sadness: “Maybe I will be next.” I remembered “our own war,” as predicted in the Najeeb’s manifesto, and I cried in the bathroom, overcome with grief. When I emerged, I told my classmates – ten years my juniors – that I believed the “nation” was still possible. On my way home, I listened to the news about politicians and killers on the tinny-sounding bus radio as the commuters all muttered in low voices, simply staring at each other.

It is not surprising, of course, that most of the political and religious symbols and elite figures in Iraq today have personally supported the rural Bedouin killing spirit, and have encouraged it and used it to serve their own tactics and projects. Most of those opponents of Saddam who have now appeared on the political and religious-political scene are merely fainter echoes of Saddam himself, only with less intensity and clarity compared with him in regards to public relations strategy. Only a few break this idea, but they have not yet been influential. They present themselves as having “modern” leadership programs built on “modern” ideas in the modern world. Since I have learned – I do not know why – to find hope in a heap of hay, I have somehow begun to view this

political minority, together with a few writers, intellectuals and artists (despite the natural opposition existing between politics and both art and literature), as being the potential future of Iraq; at the present time, however, they have no chance whatsoever.

- 5 Because I have learned to find hope in a heap of hay, I still try to pass this hope on to my small family, and comment on it whenever I get the chance. Sometimes, embarrassment at the reflection of reality in my own eyes interferes with my speeches on hope. I then tell them that imagination is the only option. I doubt that I will be able to survive once more, living in the very house that was looted three years ago, which is now surrounded not by anti-theft devices, but by anti-murder ones (although owning my own gun is not one of these devices, as I do not possess one). However, I often recall the time when I could have bought fifteen guns at once, and every night, as the sound of Baghdad’s gun battles begin, a small war begins inside me before I fall asleep. My inner war is fed by an ambiguous emotion, made up of a mixture of guilt and haughtiness – the guilt is in reaction to my survival instinct, and the haughtiness is that of the poet rejecting the idea of buying a gun to defend himself and his family. The ambiguity is represented by two opposing questions: Why on earth should I let anyone kill me? Could my hands really take the life of another person?... This small internal war, whose terrified soldiers hide in the narrow trench between my pillow and my wife’s, a battle between two enemies with one shared telos, is a common war amongst the remaining “urbanites” of “rural” Baghdad. In my opinion, a long, blood-soaked and tear-drenched era will pass before Baghdad’s “urbanites” – a new generation of politicians and new intellectuals – can dismantle this crowded village that we now live in, and make a city out of it. Who knows? Maybe others will survive that day, and distribute a new Survivors manifesto, in which they can categorically state, “The war is over.”



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THE AUTHORS

Faris Harram was born in 1972 in Najaf, and has lived in Baghdad since 1986. Between 1999 and the war in 2003, he worked as a copy editor for the magazines Afaq 'Arabiyya and al-Tali'a il-Adabiyya. He won the Sharjah award for Arab poetic achievement in 2005, in the United Arab Emirates, following the publication in the Emirate of his first book of poetry *Marra Wahida* (One Time), also in 2005. To date, he has written four plays: "Zayd and 'Amro don't drink tea in the guestroom or in the kitchen because there is no tea in the first place. Dangers from a teapot, dangers from a cup and dangers from a human being, and there is no tea in the first place" (1999), "Salma keeps silent for many reasons" (2002), "How shall we hear them... answer" (2002), and "The house in which I spent the most beautiful days of my life... had only three rooms" (2004). He co-wrote the screenplay of the Iraqi feature film *Ghayr Saleh* (Underexposure) in 2004, with the film's director and his friend Oday Rasheed and the artist Hayder Helo. The film received a number of international awards. Following the occupation of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, he co-founded, in Baghdad, the Najeen Group for Arts and Culture, writing the group's first manifesto and contributing to its succeeding schedules and agendas. Faris Harram is currently studying philosophy at Baghdad University, and preparing to publish all of his poems in one book.

Abdalmohsin Saleh was born in Najaf, Iraq in 1969. He received his BA in literature and Spanish language from Baghdad University in 1990 and holds a number of additional certificates of training in media and civil society. From 1982 until 1991, he worked in the theater as actor in over ten plays. Today he is a member of the Iraqi General Union of Writers, and a member of the General Union of Arab Writers/Jordan. In 2003 he has occupied the position of editor in the magazine Yanabee, published by Al Hikmah establishment in Najaf and in 2004-2005 has worked as journalist for the joint German-Iraqi Radio program Al-Intikhabi. Currently, Abdalmohsin Salih is coordinating civil society projects in Iraq and is about to finalize his first novel.

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Abdalmohsin Saleh and Faris Harram